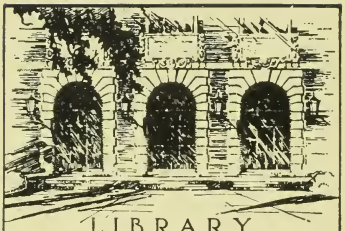

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# A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN.

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HURST & BLACKETT, 13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET

# A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN

BY

A. PRICE

AUTHOR OF

"A RUSTIC MAID," "WHO IS SYLVIA?"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1887.

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# A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN.

## CHAPTER I.

### 'STUARTS' AND ITS MASTER.

It is a good many years now, though there are people living in the old West-country town who recollect it still, since the time when a prominent figure in their midst was John Alwyn, magistrate, counsellor of the borough, counsel-man on matters pecuniary, personal, domestic, or civic, to numberless fellow-burghers; last surviving representative of a high-class legal firm, that through three generations had held honourable rank in the county, and fore-

most place in the society of Stillcote-Upton.

He was a tall, fine man, this lawyer, bearing his more than half-century of life with the ease of one who has always owned perfect health, few cares, and a full purse; liberal-minded, as cordial intercourse with every grade betokened; trusted and trustworthy; heartily respected by his wide circle of acquaintance, heartily liked by a smaller circle of intimates.

That this need not have been small goes without saying, for not a house in Stillcote-Upton but would gladly have welcomed Mr. Alwyn for its guest—not a family but would have been delighted to visit at his red-bricked dwelling, 'Stuarts,' as it had been named long ago, when for an hour it sheltered a royal fugitive from a fatal field; and which, with front first-floor dedicated to clerks and offices, stood at the

main entrance of the town, faced by an iron palisaded enclosure of smooth-shaven lawn, through which curved a crescent drive, beginning and ending with tall gates flanked by sturdy brick pillars, each wearing as its crown a huge lichen-tinted stone ball; but the burden of general visiting the master of his mansion had never cared to incur. As a bachelor he had not been expected to cultivate the art of entertaining. There were dozens of ways by which he could—and did—requite such hospitality as he received of other folks. For the rest, he liked nothing better than to keep his house as it had been in his father's time before him, solid and handsome in all its equipments, unchanged by fluctuating fashions of the day, and to spend his evenings mostly in the solitude —to him never wearisome—of a well stocked library.

But this rule of life knew one exception. Once every week post-prandial seclusion gave place to another arrangement, which might almost be called an institution.

On every Wednesday the leather-covered table of the study retired to a bay-window overlooking a long garden; four stands, which resided elsetime up four corners of the room, were brought forth and set in unvarying array before four chairs, which would be presently tenanted by the host and a trio as devoted to the intricacies of classical instrumentation as he was himself.

Never had Beethoven a more devout worshipper than the leader of this weekly quartette, and never, perhaps, was his life to know happier moments than those spent in affectionate interpretation of some unspeakably lovely adagio, some minuet as graceful as the scent of a new-blown rose is sweet, or some rondo so crisp and fresh as to

put the long-drawn discords of latter-day harmony to shame.

For three hours these coadjutors would ply their bows, and then would follow supper—plain, but excellent as epicure could wish; and then, as the timepiece between the windows rang forth 'Auld Lang Syne' and struck eleven, the party would break up. Second violin and 'cello—one the widower rector of the chief church St. Clement's, the other a physician of ample means and leisure—would go off arm-in-arm towards the West-end of the little town while the viola would turn down High Street to a more modest abode.

Socially he was somewhat less than the others; by name Jacob Cheene, chief of the copying and what may be called 'general drudgery' department in Mr. Alwyn's office—a man of great devotion to his employer, but of perhaps, ex-

cept in one direction, no particular ability, since he gained no upward step in his employment from youth to age, save that to which long plodding service entitled him.

People were amused at the lawyer's patronage of his subordinate when it began years before, and thought he might have chosen, as sharer of his tastes and companion of his two daily walks, some one more suitable than an inferior *employé*. But Mr. Alwyn had a habit of following his own prejudices. Possibly he may have had other reasons for taking to Jacob Cheene, over and above their mutual love of one harmonious mistress; but, at any rate, his kindly notice of the quiet, shy man never slackened. By now the clerk's place in the quartette was as well established as his master's; while year in and year out, as half-past nine chimed from St. Clement's Tower, the lawyer would emerge from his

door, and bend his steps east-ward as far as Mr. Cheene's domicile; then the two would return, reaching the office invariably at ten, reappearing to make precisely the same journey at four o'clock to the minute.

Their coming and going was as natural now as the sound of the church-bells themselves. Shopkeepers, postmen, policemen, and *habitués* of the thoroughfare would have felt any day begin awkwardly which had not brought the pair by to receive the well-differentiated bow and nod of greeting; and, if the custom ever evoked question or smile, it was gravely explained as 'just one of Mr. Alwyn's pleasant bachelor ways,' with which, of course, no fault could possibly be found.

Indeed, no one ever found fault with any of the worthy gentleman's ways, except that they *were* bachelor; and this fact had been a thorn in the flesh to, and somewhat

of a stigma on, the ladies of those parts for the last thirty years.

That a man so eligible, so wealthy, and so evidently born for domesticity, should have escaped the snares of matrimony laid incessantly with more or less craftiness in his path was an enigma provoking to spinster minds—a standing vexation to many a would-be matron! But the gentleman was apparently invulnerable to female charms. By now, all hopes of his changing his condition were given up. 'Confirmed old bachelor!' was the title freely applied to him; and people were beginning to wonder who, in the absence of near relatives, would be his heir, when at the precise juncture he—or fate for him—upset everybody's calculation in the most extraordinary manner. In plain English, he got married.

The precise steps of this rash and marvellous act were as follows:—

It has been said Mr. Alwyn never entertained; but one solemn annual festivity was the exception which proved this rule.

In late June or early July, when the long, splendidly-kept rows of strawberry-beds in his big south sloping garden were in full luscious bearing, when after much netting and tending, and watching from early dawn, to 'keep they brutes of blackbirds off,' Bond, their guardian, would pronounce them fit, and bid his master 'hev 'em eat!' then short-notice invitations went forth, scarcely ever to meet refusal, for every one was on the look-out for them. Mr. Alwyn's four old servants awoke into unusual activity. The large, rarely-used dining and drawing-rooms were set in company order, brocaded curtains were shaken out, dragon china was brought forth, such silver was so polished that the tables looked like an entanglement of sunbeams; and

some four or five score guests made the most of their host's rare hospitality, ate his fruit, strolled about his broad paths flanked by great bushes, guelder roses, and such out-of-date flower-belles, and wished that their chance of such a treat came oftener.

It was at one of these strawberry gatherings that a stranger appeared. 'An old schoolfellow of mine whom I'd not seen for years—not since she lost her husband; and she is only with me for a short time, so I ventured to bring her,' explained Mrs. Morton, wife of the musical doctor; upon which Mrs. Villiers, a most distinctly handsome woman of perhaps five-and-thirty, drew near, made a very graceful bow containing just enough timidity to be appealing, and 'did so hope she was not intruding!' and John Alwyn, in his courtliest manner, hastened to assure her he was

only too much honoured, and—two years short of sixty though he might be—certain is it that for the first time in his existence his fancy was caught, the heart that had resisted every species of maiden blandishment succumbed to the widow!

What the lady knew of him and his position before her visit could not have been much, but she skilfully made the most of it on that June afternoon.

'Had Mr. Alwyn always lived here?' she asked, as he gallantly accompanied the stranger of the party along the lime-tree walk. 'Oh, what a pleasure to feel rooted to such a charming spot!' looking round with dark liquid eyes. 'Now, *she* had to live in London. Ah!' with a shrug of her very handsome shoulders, 'the dust, the noise, the unrest were frightful. But,' with quite a touching sigh, 'she supposed she was doomed to it. Poor people, such

as herself, had no choice. And were those trees actually planted just when Mr. Alwyn was born?' as her host pointed out the beauties of 'Stuarts.' 'Why, how fast they must have grown, then! To a smoke-dried mortal like her'—with a becoming blush at the self-uttered slander, for her complexion was still brilliantly clear—'the place seemed a perfect paradise. But Mr. Alwyn was a very naughty, naughty man. 'Why?' 'Why, because,' indicating the gay groups upon the lawn, 'among so many charming friends he had chosen no Eve!'

Perchance the bright audacity of the lady's manner took the lawyer a little off his head. He straightened himself up at that suggestion about Eve, and began to wonder within himself whether fifty-eight could be called exactly 'old.' He looked at his reflection in a deep-framed concave

mirror over the sideboard when he took his fair guest in for refreshment, and flattered himself his diminished figure had a decidedly juvenile air. Mrs. Villiers was charmed with the cream, with the china, with the spoons, with the room, with everything; and the more she admired his possessions the more he admired her taste. She caught sight of musical paraphernalia through the open door of the library, and must needs inspect his Cremona: 'The only instrument on earth worth studying!' she declared, admitting, quite apologetically, that she could only play upon those wretched things, pianos, and sing—a little. 'Ah!' turning over a well-used score, 'here was that delicious thing of Beethoven's. How she loved the "motif!"' And with a voice rich and well-trained she sol-faed forth the melody. 'But, oh, if Mr. Alwyn would play it!

Where were the rest of the quartette? Not all here! Ah! then she couldn't hear it, and she was *so* sorry!'

But then and there her infatuated host remedied the disappointment.

'If Mrs. Villiers were remaining over Wednesday, and with Mrs. Morton would dine with him, he and his fellow-performers would proudly do their best to please her.' And the following week positively witnessed a stately dinner in the fascinating lady's behalf, to the amazement and disgust of the old servants, who saw in it only too clearly the beginning of the end.

And such it was.

Mrs. Villiers, graciousness itself to every individual of the quartette, preserved an attitude of extreme interest through three sonatas, and moved about the stately drawing-room in the intervals, so charmed with every piece of quaint old bijouterie,

looking herself so bewitching, in a long gracefully-sweeping robe of soft dark satin, that when she left, and her host returned to the vacant room, it seemed as though she alone, to the extinction of others' presence, had been adorning it; her single absence left it desolate.

It was only a few days after that evening that Stillcote-Upton was electrified by the news that Mr. Alwyn was to be married, and at once!

The widow may have felt that all delays are dangerous, and so prudently avoided any when once her suitor was fairly at her feet. A brother from the South of England appeared upon the scene to attend to the matter of settlements—'for, please, don't speak to *me* about them,' begged the lady, 'I'm such a baby about business!' but, as her relative was quite the reverse, a very handsome arrangement was made for the

bride-elect, whose first husband, from his Civil Service income, had left her but slenderly provided for.

Now twelve thousand pounds were to be hers and her one child's, Leonora Villiers, a little demoiselle of five: the interest, the mother's solely as an independent income. Six thousand more were placed with the same trustees as part portion for any future offspring, the interest to be the wife's only till any such came of age. Further fortune for the same would, of course, be provided by will. And these deeds were accomplished, the fair widow had returned to town, Mr. Alwyn had followed her there, and the wedding was a fact established before people in general had left off saying the whole report must be a preposterous hoax.

But an early August announcement in the ever-veracious *Chronicle* dispelled that

notion. Mr. Alwyn was indisputably married; and, though there was not a soul in the place but wished him personally well, equally was there no single townsman but expressed his opinion, more or less bluntly, that there was no fool like an old fool, and hoped, with foreboding shakes of the head, that this autumnal wooing and wedding might not turn out a tremendous blunder.

It showed no signs of doing so just at first.

Bride and bridegroom returned from their honey-moon looking very handsome and very self-satisfied: and, for a brief season, the change effected seemed for the better.

Hospitality opened the doors of the old mansion oftener. Mr. Alwyn's many friends gave receptions in his honour. These were worthily returned, and the wife

appeared indefatigable in endeavours to please eveywhere. For a few weeks the lady's unvarying graciousness secured universal applause, and Stillcote-Upton considered the lawyer's matrimonial venture a veritable success.

But gradually this feeling changed.

As a matter of course the old habits of a quarter of a century had early to be discarded. There could be no morning traversing of the High Street now with Jacob Cheene for Mr. Alwyn, when the mistress of his table had hardly put in an appearance for breakfast at the hour he had been wont to start out, and all his afternoons had to be devoted to the strange arts of giving and receiving calls. And the Wednesday evenings, which Mrs. Alwyn had smilingly declared 'were never to be disturbed—oh, never!' made but a brief pretence of prolonging their existence.

They were attempted, truly, but at the first the lady, less humble than of yore, desired a share in the performance, and essayed an accompaniment on a fine 'grand,' purchased as soon as she came home, and the time under her guidance got into perplexities, and an 'allegro finale' stranded them all in despairing confusion, and the next week Mrs. Alwyn had a headache and kept to her own room. A dinner-party postponed the third. Then the clerical second violin undertook some evening services for a friend, the 'cello began to fancy the night air bad for his bronchitis (an ailment newly developed), and the viola saw his once greatest delight melting away with something of relief. The sensitiveness of his lowlier sphere had early discovered and winced under one quality of the bride which the whole town found out later on. The wife of the rich lawyer—his

master—patronised her husband's clerk with a condescension that would have poisoned the greatest kindness upon earth. And so the quartette broke up, 'to meet by special arrangement as often as we can, you know,' said the leader, rather ruefully; but the meetings somehow never managed to arrange themselves that first winter, and by the second they were still more impracticable.

For by then Mrs. Alwyn, having with much cordiality inspected the society of Stillcote-Upton, had come to the conclusion that it was not on the whole worth her maintaining an amiable front to please. So she took no pains to prolong her short-lived popularity; began to have serious doubts as to whether the town suited her health, grew quite certain that the south end of it did *not*, and between pretty persuasions, which she still exercised over her elder-

ly husband, and persistent complaints, at length induced Mr. Alwyn to leave 'Stuarts,' the old home of three generations, and rent some three miles countryward a larger and far more pretentious dwelling, known as Guyswick Hall.

Here the lady soared into high society, and devised entertainments that included few townspeople. The closer county circle was her ambition, and into this, by dint of some ability and good looks, plus her husband's money and acknowledged standing, she contrived to effect an entrance.

Under his wife's rule, which he never combated till it grew past his control, the lawyer had soon a marvellously fine establishment, with horses, servants, equipages such as he had never felt the want of before, though he was now given to understand they were the merest necessaries of life. Each day a smart groom drove

him to his office at the old deserted house (whose blank windows gazed at him so reproachfully, he knew no rest till he had settled a chief clerk in residence, much to Mrs. Alwyn's annoyance—'As if we could not afford to let it stand empty!' she said), and every afternoon his wife's brougham, with or without herself, would fetch him out. Of his four old servants all were soon gone, to be replaced by double the number of new faces. Of his old friends he scarcely got a glimpse, except as business brought them together. So much change, much grandeur, much show of enjoyment, and assuredly much use of riches were imported into his life. Whether they brought with them much comfort or much happiness, was a point on which outsiders indulged in stronger opinions than he permitted himself.

But one thing the second year of his

married life brought him which was a joy unquestionable—something to be wondered at, admired, gloried in—in other words a little daughter.

## CHAPTER II.

### LIFE'S FEBRUARY.

Now the advent of this little one was regarded by the father and mother in very different lights.

To Mrs. Alwyn it represented a certain amount of care, which she minimised by giving the child over chiefly to the tending of servants: a temporary check to her gay life which, however, she recovered as rapidly as possible: and, gravest annoyance of all, a claimant to a third of her marriage settlement, which she had fondly hoped to keep intact in her own hands, an heiress probably to a much larger sum which otherwise might have become hers.

So a dreadful disappointment the arrival of this small mortal was to the fashionable and far-calculating parent, who, in some sort, though maybe without premeditated unkindness, always seemed to bear her younger offspring a grudge for having presumed to enter into existence, and gave her only a chill, perfunctory affection, very different from the devotion which she lavished on little Leonora, child of her first, more loveful marriage.

Only in one respect did the mother treat her children alike—in the matter of their outward adornment. The spending of money was a luxury neither her youth nor her first matrimonial position had granted her; now she revelled in it, and the baby's toilettes matched her step-sister's elaborate costumes, receiving from her christening appearance in white satin and swansdown, through every stage of infant decoration,

more maternal attention than all other requirements put together.

This done, Mrs. Alwyn felt contentedly that nothing more could be demanded of her, and with Leonora for constant companion troubled herself but little with the unwelcome presence of her last-born.

Not so the father. He, poor man, had found out well enough by now that he had made an irremediable blunder, that he himself had been a very secondary attraction to the lady who had accepted his name for the sake of his purse.

But he bore his disappointment with quiet stoicism, wisely resolving not to make himself a further laughing-stock by complaining of what could never be cured, and the birth of his child seemed to him an absolute recompense for all domestic failures.

She was to him the most marvellous and

delightful piece of creation upon earth. Early morning, late night, found him with his offering of growing love at the cradle-side of this dimpled, solemn-eyed miracle. A whole vista of new joys opened upon him with the first stammering utterance of her baby tongue, and his only pang concerning her was that life, which gave him this treasure so late, would be closing for him while her days were yet in their spring-time.

His friends of bachelor years might have inclined towards ridiculing the pride of this first-time father of three-score, but it was too genuine, and, counting the great gap of age between sire and child, too pathetic to be lightly jested at. So Mr. Alwyn's baby-girl was accepted unreservedly into the circle of all who would stand well with her wealthy parent. Clients made a point of inquiring as to her progress

on the world's first stage. Clerks, married ones, were deeply interested when her little pearly bits of teeth came through; single ones were elated when she could run alone. Now and then the marvellous little maiden would be brought to 'Stuarts' and exhibited in a sort of triumphal progress, first to Mrs. Greaves, the manager's wife, who, with many of her own, had still a stock of enthusiastic admiration for this one; then to the old gardener, still retained, who 'blessed her pretty eyes, and never shouldn't have thowt to see sich a sight as she was, never!' and then to Jacob Cheene, for whose grave, plain countenance the little one soon showed a discerning affection, and would close one of her small, soft hands round his long forefingers, and so lead him about the place in a state of embarrassed pleasure, at which Mr. Alwyn would chuckle with amusement.

'Little Syd makes her choice early,' he would say. 'She takes the full responsibilities of being the only young Alwyn, and means to be true to old friends, like her grandfather and great-grandfather!'

'Ay, and like her father,' would Mr. Cheene answer, 'as there'll be plenty to tell her, myself soonest if I live long enough.'

At which his employer would reach over his little one's head a remonstrating hand on the speaker's stooping shoulders, with—

'Chut, chut, Jacob! don't be personal' (the lawyer was proud of the esteem attaching to his family, but never greedy of compliment for himself); 'you teach her her scales when she's big enough, that will be undertaking enough for you. I'll buy her a violin as soon as she can hold it, and we'll see if we can't play some trios to our satisfaction yet!'

And the two grey-haired men would laugh, almost forgetting the burden of their years as they mapped out Sydney's musical future, leading her uncertain steps the while along the lime-tree walk, little divining what chords, harmonious or discordant, their three lives would strike out and sound upon men's ears in the unknown by-and-by.

Meanwhile, while Sydney—or to give the full baptismal title, bestowed in remembrance of her father's mother, 'Sydney Grey'—Alwyn was growing out of the vagueness of infancy into the more definite shape of six or seven years old, the home life of Guyswick Hall, if altered in any respect, had altered for the worse. Master and mistress were wide as the poles asunder in their tastes. Practically, as well as metaphorically, Beethoven was shelved, and Offenbach ruled in his place.

Mrs. Alwyn's brilliant little dinners, or gay evening assemblies, were arranged without regard to her husband's wishes or engagements. If he appeared at them, so much the better for the look of the thing. If he kept away, she had always some ready excuse for his absence, and, shining most herself when he was not by, so exercised her powers of entertainment that the elderly host was very little missed.

Splendidly dressed, lavish at all points, patroness of every amusement in the neighbourhood, quite clear now of the common professional set to which her marriage had first introduced her, the lady made a point of enjoying life most thoroughly. Her ponies, her brougham, her lace and her furs, her orchids and ferns, her pug dogs, and fifty other fancies, were food for gossiping amusement to half the countryside, and the only share her husband had

in these increasing luxuries was to find the funds for their purchase.

Over this part of the business he had of late demurred more than once, the last time with serious vexation, but with no better success than to bring down upon himself a prolonged dose of sullen indignation and a heavy purchase of costly Satsuma for the drawing-room shelves. And possibly this state of things troubled the lawyer more than he cared to confess, or in fact had any one to confess to. But it seems to Sydney that, just at this time when recollection of her father begins, he grew older and graver very fast indeed.

Other people were of the same opinion.

'You're not looking yourself, Alwyn,' the rector of St. Clement's said, advancing from his garden-gate one morning as the lawyer drove by to his office, Sydney perched by his side according to frequent

custom. 'I don't believe, after all, Guyswick suits you half as well as "Stuarts" did.'

'Half! no, not a hundredth part,' answered John Alwyn, hastily; 'though,' pulling himself up short, too proud to parade his troubles, 'the place is well enough in its way. Why don't you come and see it oftener?'

'Oh, you know,' evasively returned the clergyman, 'I'm busy. My boy is back from Oxford. I'm coaching him through the "long." But I do want a chat with you about'—dropping his voice and leaning forward—'that investment of mine. I'll come round to your office soon. This week, if it will suit you.'

'Next will do better,' said the lawyer, gathering up the slackened reins, his forehead contracting, though he was not given to signs of impatience.

'Then next be it. And well, little maid,' smiling at Sydney's gravely attentive face, 'what did you mean by not being a boy, eh? A lad could have been helping his father by now, couldn't he?'

'So can a girl! So can I; so I *will!*' returned Sydney, her great dark eyes, sometimes hazel, sometimes deepest blue, dilating with a most unchildlike anxiety. ('Why did everyone keep telling her father he looked ill?') 'Papa, may I stay with you to-day, and sit by you and stamp your letters? You like that sometimes, don't you?'

'Little goose,' he answered, fondly, 'don't I like it always? We'll indulge in that treat soon, when we're not so full of work.'

'Nor so full of cares,' thought the rector, as he stepped back and let them drive on. 'It strikes me, John Alwyn, that marriage

of yours was about the worst venture you ever made in *your* life!'

Which was nearly, but unfortunately not quite the truth!

Two scenes of that the first summer registered in Sydney's memory abide with her, never to be effaced.

One is of a June evening, herself led to a much-decorated dressing-room to say formal good-night to her mother, who, very dazzling and superb, is arrayed for some evening visit. Her father stands by the window.

'It is the third time,' Mrs. Alwyn says, in tones of annoyance that she does not soften as the child enters, 'the third time I have accepted for you to the Wynnes, and you have always called off going. It is most ungracious and provoking of you. They may take offence. Lady Wynne always looks incredulous when I say

you are unwell, or something of the sort.'

'She need not be incredulous to-night,' returns Mr. Alwyn, wearily; 'there will be no pretence about your apology for once.'

Mrs. Alwyn flashes at him a doubting glance.

'If you are not well, why did you stay at your office so late?'

'Expecting letters.'

'And never gave a thought, of course, to my convenience! You knew I should wait till you came back, to see whether you were going with me or not.'

'I assured you I should not, before I left this morning. They are people out of our range. The effort of an evening there, now when I'm harassed in all directions, would have crazed me.'

His tone is so broken, so dejected, that Sydney's eyes fill suddenly with tears as,

with a furtive side-look at her mother, she steals behind the dressing-table to her father's elbow. But Mrs. Alwyn's pity is reserved for her own grievance. The Wynnes are particular as to the proprieties, and she is bent on dragging her husband to their dinner.

'It is not at all agreeable for me to go again alone. There may be busybodies who will make impertinent remarks. You really must exert yourself, Mr. Alwyn, and accompany me sometimes, or——'

'Or,' he interrupts, looking with a faint gleam of his old admiration at his wife, handsome still—'a splendid woman' some people yet called her—'or else you must give up some of your engagements and stay at home with the old man you've tied yourself to! Well, is that such a hard fate! Helen'—he uses the name so seldom, she starts to hear it, and draws a

little back as he advances—'I'm worried now, and—and anxious. Could you not forego this dinner? Could you not stay with me this evening?'

She gathers up the long train of her beautiful gleaming dress with a gesture of irritation at such an inconsiderate suggestion.

'You *know* the St. Heliers are to be there!' she says, with an emphasis which seems to express that such society would draw her from any duty on earth; 'I am alive to the compliment of being asked to meet them, Mr. Alwyn, if you are not! Don't come down with me if you are not well. Lettice will put my cloak on, thank you. Good-night. And, Sydney,' just stopping to let the child touch her cheek, 'you may well be pale. You ought to be in bed!'

The carriage wheels sound down the

sweep and past the chestnut drive, by the curtseying women at the lodge; and, quite sure now that the house-mistress is gone, Sydney caresses her father's listless hand as he sighs heavily, and asks,

'Shall we go down, papa, to your dinner? And need I go to bed?'

He wants no dinner, he says, and she may stay with him a little while; so they descend together to a small, west-fronting room, opening on a delicious piece of lawn spangled with beds of blue forget-me-nots, sheltered from the setting sun by wide boughs of a glorious emerald-tinted beech.

The red light flickers through the leaves, and sets the shadows dancing on the walls. Chaffinches by dozens kept cheep-cheep-che-e-ping outside. Sydney tells her father the doings of the day: how her white rose is out at last; he is to have the first bud for his button-hole to-morrow· and how

she can ride round the croft without a guiding-rein, and Havens, her coachman-tutor, says she will be a credit to him. Mr. Alwyn listens very silently, ready with a smile when Sydney looks at him, not smiling when released from her gaze. She sees his thoughts are far away, and presently ceases talking.

The shadows from the beech are gone now. Twilight fills the room as they still sit on, and Leonora's evening practice jingles on upstairs unceasingly. The child is half asleep when a strange step on the gravel sets the dogs barking, then the butler brings in a lamp and something in a pink envelope.

Sydney thinks she has tired her father, leaning so long upon his arm, for his hand trembles as he opens his missive. She would read it too, but he puts her aside,

kisses her slowly once—twice—and bids her go to bed.

Then he comes up for another good-night, with a leather bag in his hand, another coat upon his arm, and Sydney, in a spasm of wakefulness, stifles her lamentations over his going a journey because he looks so troubled, bids him be quick back, and follows, a little, barefooted white-night-gowned figure, to watch over the bannisters for the last glimpse of him as he leaves thus, in unexplained haste, his splendid home at Guyswick.

## CHAPTER III.

### A SHADOW OF THE FUTURE.

And this is the other scene which, misty of detail, will haunt Sydney to the end of time.

A pretty hamlet at a little distance from Guyswick. A grey old church looming up across a rustic road, near by the fruit-trees of a cottage-garden. A warm, sunny afternoon, with a great humming of bees and scent of stocks and wall-flowers in the air. The constant sound of a busy hoe at work, not far off, and the crooning of some minor-keyed ditty by an old figure, dressed quaintly in dark-coloured stuff, with

snow-white cap and kerchief pinned in front, knitting diligently under shade of a yellow laburnum.

This is 'Taffy,' or 'Mrs. Taverner,' affectionately abbreviated, the nurse whose last piece of official work was presiding over Sydney's very earliest days, and who now, with well-earned savings, takes the rest of threescore years and ten. Her home is with a daughter, once a servant at 'Stuarts,' whose husband married from his post of second gardener there to the dignity of a cottage and 'marketing' for Stillcote-Upton on his own account. He is clerk of the church close by; a thrifty, hard-working soul, plodding contentedly on from morn till night, putting his few pounds by year after year against a rainy day, or maybe for a legacy to his good 'missus,' or a fortune for the lasses who are now doing for themselves in honest service.

They are steady, sterling people all in their way, and the elder dame is a prodigious favourite with all her children, as she calls a goodly list, beginning with men long since out of their teens, ending with Sydney Alwyn. Her duties with the brood whose first cries she hushed have not finished with the nursery, as many of her grown-up babies testify, for hopes and fears, troubles and joys, loves and hates, find their way to Taffy's sympathetic confidence often before the household they belong to half suspect them, and rarely a week goes by without bringing a visitor out of her old working circle to nurse's cottage.

There Sydney, to her unfailing delight, is sometimes allowed a sojourn.

When her mother takes Leonora to the sea, when any epidemic is reported at Guyswick, or if any jar domestic lessens

the establishment for a time, the child is sent for a few days to Nurse. There her father comes round morning or evening to see her. There she revels in the freedom of her oldest frocks, and learns the letters and syllables so difficult to attain in the school-room at home quite easily off the tombstones in the churchyard under Taffy's spectacled instructions.

Naturally, they make much of the little lady at the cottage, for, over and above their genuine fondness for her, the visits of the rich man's child are pleasant little windfalls to these frugal folk. So they keep a tiny cupboard-like apartment, with a diamond-paned casement that tiger-lilies peep in at and monthly roses are always blooming round, for her very own. They mostly find some infant chicks or downy rabbits for her playmates. They fix a swing for her in the big russet apple-tree

and pluck for her any flowers her fancy fixes on.

She has a chain of double daisies round her now, as with arms upward clinging to the ropes she sits slowly swaying backwards and forwards in the chequered light under the apple boughs, and her old guardian, stopping the clicking of her bright pins to watch her, thinks this last of her foster flock is the fairest of them all, and wonders what makes her changeling look so very grave.

Presently Sydney calls to her—

'Taffy, when did I come here?'

'On Tuesday, my pretty.'

'And what's to-day?'

'Friday.'

'And papa hasn't been to see me!'

'Maybe he's not back yet, missy.'

'No, perhaps not,' says the child, slowly,

'for,' brightening, 'he will be sure to come when he gets home.'

'Sure,' repeats the old woman, confidently; and then adds, 'Was your mamma gone out too, Miss Sydney? Havens didn't say.'

'And—I don't know,' answers Sydney, her voice dropping, as it always does when she speaks of her mother, who never gives the younger born more place in her pursuits than she does in her heart. Then, still swinging softly, she thinks profoundly a minute or two, and the outcome of her meditation is,

'I wish, Taffy, I always lived with you, if papa came every day to see me.'

Which says more than she intends, for nurse looks sorry as she answers—

'Nay, my pretty. Mr. Alwyn couldn't afford that noways!'

'Not afford it! Do I cost so much to keep?'

Nurse is glad of something to laugh at.

'Why, afford to spare you, Miss Sydney, I mean. Your cost ain't much! We wouldn't mind keeping you for nothing.'

'Oh, then,' says the child, 'if I——' but she breaks off abruptly, disturbed by the sound of an approaching step.

The little gate at the end of the garden path is unlatched, and, striding between sweet-williams and Canterbury bells, up comes a tall, big-framed lad, with reddish-brown curly hair and eyes, over which he draws his darker brows as if to keep the glare of sunshine off.

Sydney ceases swinging to watch, a trifle jealously, as Taffy gets up and joyfully greets this new-comer with,

'Why, Master Bertie, back again from school! Oh, I ask pardon, my old head

can't keep up with such a lot of new names; anyhow, back, and not grown too proud to come and see me, I declare!'

'Back!' repeats the youth, as he gives her welcoming hands a hearty shake. 'Yes, and likely to keep back. But proud!'—flinging himself on the end of the bench under the laburnum—'It's a little too late in the day for me to set up in that line, I promise you. For, oh, Taffy, do you know we are in a muddle, and no mistake!'

Then he leans forward till he brings his face, with the square-cut chin resting in his large, nervous hand, close to Nurse Taverner's shoulder, and plunges into the story of whatever escapade or veritable trouble he has just hinted at.

Sydney hears nothing of it all, for, when assured that he is a stranger to her, or nearly so (she has just a glimmering notion

she has seen him somewhere, in the town perhaps), and that nurse and he want to talk together, she intuitively turns her back upon the pair, and gives her undivided attention to a couple of black-caps chasing each other in and out among the apple leaves. But presently a startled 'Good sakes alive!' from the old woman attracts her attention, and she looks round while Taffy says something else, of her apparently, for most certainly it is *at* her the boy's deep-set eyes flash the wrathful glance she is just in time to catch, as he exclaims, passionately,

'An imp of evil! I hate her!'

'Oh, Master Bertie, do hush!' The child's senses, on the alert now, hear her old friend plead, and then she jumps down from her swing, runs off past Mr. Lewis hoeing French beans in his shirt-sleeves, and hides herself and a babyish disposi-

tion to cry in a grove of currant bushes at the furthermost corner of the garden.

Somebody says he hates her, and she has never hurt that some one! Why does he hate her—*her*, when she does so love to be loved? He has called her a dreadful sort of name which she is positive she cannot deserve. Will many people treat her like this as she grows older? A fright of the future overtakes her. A great qualm of aggrieved injustice sets sobs rising and falling under her fading daisy chain, and her sensitive little soul, inured by now to cold neglect, frets sorely at the notion of active unmerited dislike.

In the midst of her distress the intruding origin of it, his conference with Taffy at an end, stalks homeward bound along the lane outside, and Sydney, no coward howsoe'er soft-hearted, dries up her tears, peeps at him over the hedge, and arrests



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his steps before he has passed the bounds of Mr. Lewis's tidy plots.

He is not by any means a grown-up man, she thinks, manhood being identical, in her mind, with grey hairs such as her father has, so she has to choose a form of address for him as she climbs over a separating stile; which point settled she confronts him and demands, with an odd mixture of the imperious and the pleading,

'Boy, why do you hate me? Stop and tell me, please.'

The lad colours awkwardly, and begins to frown again, but looking from his great height on the exceedingly anxious little face upturned to him he relents and tries to stave the matter off as a species of joke.

'Oh, that was nothing, little one! Only some of my—my nonsense. Don't you trouble about anything you heard.'

'But I must trouble,' Sydney persists; 'I didn't like it at all. You said I was a—a—nymph of evil. *Why?*'

The lad, hard pressed, catches at her blunder.

'I never said you were a "nymph" of anything!'

'Well, something of that sort, you did indeed; something—unkind!' the great, sad eyes filling again with tears.

'But I really never meant to be unkind to you, honour bright I didn't,' cries the lad, blinking down at her with very uncertain gaze—truth to tell he would not be sorry to descend to her level, and, for all his five feet ten inches, to let loose some of his private vexations in a hearty good howl—'but I am awfully bothered, and I—I was angry with some one else, and I didn't think of what I said. That is the truth. So just you forget all you heard.'

Sydney sighs, relieved, but not fully satisfied.

'Then you don't hate me?'

'No, no, nonsense! Certainly not.'

A great breath of growing contentment.

'I *am* glad!' emphatically; 'and you won't be cross with me ever any more?'

'Why should I?'

'But you won't?'

'Well, I won't then.'

'Thank you. Now you may go away, boy. Good-bye!'

She slips her threepenny-bit of a hand into one of his huge ones, and makes her farewell with such a gladdened altered countenance that he is smitten with remorse for having vexed such a small innocent thing. So he stoops down and gives her a kiss, with a furtive glance about as if afraid lest a bird on the wing

should catch sight of the harmless peace-offering.

'There, run off,' he says, lifting her clean over the stile with one sweep of his great strong arms; 'go back to Taffy. Or no, look here,' his brows knitting again, 'play about first a few minutes. And, I say,' holding her still by a great bunch of holland frock and red sash, 'never you mind if people are cross now and then. Take my advice and don't care about it. Good-bye!'

He stops to see her safely traverse Lewis's long garden, and when he has started turns back once more to watch the dark-haired child passing on through the orchard.

'Poor little thing!' he mutters, though his tone of pity is at variance with the scowl that gathers on his face again; 'poor little thing!' and for all the wrath he may be nursing carries away with him a

kindly recollection of the tender-spirited-seven-year-old maid, whom, spite of all he was to owe her, he was never in this world to see again.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MORE FAREWELLS THAN ONE.

Memory has a trick of placing her pegs so irregularly, especially in the brains of the young, and hanging upon them incidents so detached from their surroundings that, while the afternoon recorded still stands vividly in the foreground of Sydney's young days, its sequence of events faded clean out of mind; perhaps because changes came thick and fast just then.

In point of fact, however, when the child had strayed among the fruit-trees long enough, according to her calculations, to dry off the traces of tears upon her cheeks,

and hide these signs of woe from Taffy's sharp eyes ; and when she returned through the back door of the cottage, between the wash-tubs on their settles and the wheelbarrow poised for the night on what she called its 'hind legs,' to the flag-floored room where tea was mostly ready by this hour, she found, indeed, the meal prepared, but, for a wonder, left unguarded, while, taking joyful advantage of this negligence, a marauding puss from a neighbouring establishment was seated on the table, alternately paying its respects to Mr. Lewis's private dish of bacon, and dipping her greasy whiskers in the milk-jug, and the natural guardians of these viands were standing far down the path by the gate, talking to no other than Havens, the Guyswick coachman.

'Papa! Where's papa?' cried Sydney, running forward. 'Is he come for me?'

An instant silence fell upon the group. Then nurse, shaking her head at the others, came forward, explaining that Mr. Alwyn 'hadn't come, but her little miss had got to go home.'

'So come along and let you an' me get your things packed up, my deary,' said the old woman, in rather a quavering voice ('Nurse doesn't like my going,' thought the child, and coaxed the old, wrinkled hand caressingly); and together the two speedily collected the small wardrobe, though Taffy was so absent-minded she had to open the bag half-a-dozen times for articles well-nigh forgotten.

Then she hugged Sydney wonderfully tight, with sundry little half-whispered, tender ejaculations, and kept close, though somewhat trembling, hold of the child as they left the tiny, white-walled sleeping-room, not loosing her till she was safe

bestowed in her nook by Havens' side, and ready to start.

John Lewis and his wife talked, low-voiced, to the man to the last moment. Maybe they never noticed a small hand stretched out, anxious for farewell, for with puzzled aspect, they only drew back, nodding to her as the pony trotted off, and for the first time she left them without a posy in her lap, or a cheery 'Mind you come and see us soon again, Miss Sydney, dear.' But nurse seemed crying, and this tribute of love supplied all other omissions.

'I'll tell papa you say I cost nothing to keep, so he'll let me come back, Taffy darling!' cried Sydney, and did just wonder, with ever so brief a pang, when, instead of the hearty responding 'Ay, that's right, do!' they only signed a last good-bye, and all turned slowly towards the cottage, talking so intently they never saw the smile she

twisted round to spend on them while their three forms were visible.

But the getting home and the next few weeks were altogether so strange that these first signs of something unusual afloat were blotted out, and so failed to furnish warning of what came later on as most unwelcome knowledge.

For her father, Havens said, was away still; and he was very ill, so Miss Foster, Leonora's governess, further informed her as soon as she reached home. And Mrs. Alwyn was away. 'Gone to him?' Miss Foster was not sure. She supposed so; very likely they would hear to-morrow. And to-morrow, from somewhere, came orders for the children to travel to London, the governess with them.

Long did Sydney remember that journey, principally by reason of the overpowering hunger she suffered through its tedious

length, and the disappointment that met her at its end. For cook, for some unexplained cause, declined to send up a schoolroom dinner before they started (she said she 'hadn't time,' though that was clearly an unkind invention, since, as the carriage bore the children from Guyswick, the recalcitrant domestic was plainly visible in company with two housemaids, a groom, and a gardener, unblushingly feasting off the early strawberries, to all seeming jauntily enjoying unlimited leisure and liberty!), and Miss Foster coldly turned a deaf ear to suggestions of biscuits by Leonora; and at the end of all those weary miles there was yet no father!

Instead of his presence ensued a most uncomfortable, dreary month at lodgings, the governess still in not very amiable or willing charge—Mrs. Alwyn sometimes with them, oftenest away, always in a mood

varying between hysteria and ill-temper. Then, after the transacting, apparently, of much business—for backwards and forwards to Vere Street came constantly a Mr. Russel, brother to Mrs. Alwyn, and a Colonel Villiers, similarly related to her first husband—a move was made in another direction.

'Are we going home to Guyswick?' Sydney asked, and was answered by her mother, wearing the aggrieved air habitual in these last few weeks, 'Home, child, but not to Guyswick.'

'Then where to?'

'A different house: in Suffolk; it belongs to your Uncle Russell.'

'And papa will be there?' kindling into delighted expectancy.

'Of course,' coldly; 'but—' hesitating, looking dubiously at Sydney's eager, radiant face, and then coming to some con-

clusion; 'but listen to me. You must recollect,' very emphatically, 'he has been very ill. You must never worry him. Above all, Sydney, you are not to pester him with questions about leaving Guyswick. You will make him worse, if you do. Remember that;' and the child faithfully promising obedience, never broke her word, understanding all too soon her need to kept it.

For when, soon after his wife, Mr. Alwyn reached St. Clairs it was but the shadow of himself that appeared—an old white-haired man, with the icy-touch of paralysis upon him; a living encumbrance that shrank willingly into the background of the new ménage; a father whom Sydney could still cling to, most dearly love, most lovingly tend, but never, never vex by reference to that recent past which seemed so sorely to have tried him.

'My poor husband is a mere wreck,' was Mrs. Alwyn's formula concerning him to the people who gradually proffered intimacy with them; first the few professional families round about the rambling, town-like village, the vicar at their head; next the lesser, but more cautious county folks. 'It is the penalty, I suppose, of strong constitutions which never know an ache or a pain all their lives through. They break up all at once. It's extremely distressing to be in the way of such cases, especially when one knows, unfortunately, nothing can be done to improve them.'

True enough, perhaps; but most certainly with Mr. Alwyn nothing was attempted.

In a few short weeks he appeared to have sunk from an important social factor into a mere nonentity. To be sure he had his food, his room, his clothing, and as feebleness increased upon him a decent

body, mother of the young gardener at 'The Dale,' came daily to and fro as a partial nurse. But Mrs. Alwyn never altered one single line of her new life to cheer or console the waning hours of her husband's. The appliances his ever-failing state demanded were allowed so grudgingly as to turn their bestowal into perfect pain, and the sole bit of brightness yet spared to the old lawyer's existence was his child.

That, as he unweariedly thanked Heaven, never failed him. Whatever slights misfortune put upon him, her young presence softened their keenest edge. With her happy unsuspicious nature by to lean on—lean on! it had come to that!—he could rouse out of his clouded retrospect of pain into almost cheerfulness, and could bear the chill indifference of others with full patience.

With too much patience it seemed to Sydney, who, during the months they were getting settled at The Dale, pondered over and grew utterly puzzled by this state of things.

Why was her father so little considered now in the household, so all but deserted, while her mother glided by degrees into a circle of acquaintances and occasional visits, and Leonora's fancies were humoured to the full? Why was their house, smaller by far, but just as well arranged as Guyswick, furnished, as time went on, with continually fresh bits of luxurious prettiness, while that cheerless north room upstairs, which Mr. Alwyn rarely quitted, had such a meagre allowance of even comforts? And why, again, later on, was the basket-carriage, purchased in their third summer at St. Clairs, appropriated solely to Mrs. Alwyn's daily drives and calls,

never to her father's more obvious needs?

These and such things past count struck Sydney's childish judgment as marked injustices, and once upon a time, when she had borne with and meditated long upon them, out of the rebellious fulness of her heart she ventured to speak.

'Mamma, may papa and I change rooms?'

'What for, Sydney?'

'So that he may sit by the window and look over the garden into the fields, mamma. Now he can only see just the bank of laurels and the wooden fence.'

'I don't imagine your father would care for gazing out of the window at any view, Sydney. He is best quite quiet, and in the room I chose for him.'

'But Mr. Dacie' (the village doctor, who paid, not oftener than once a month, a formal call) 'said yesterday he might be

better if he had a cheerfuller look-out, mamma.'

'You had no right to be upstairs when Mr. Dacie called,' said Sydney's mother, sharply; 'why were you not at lessons?'

'Because Miss Stevens' (Miss Foster's less costly successor) 'said she had no time to hear me yesterday, she was so busy with Leonora. But *may* papa have my room, mamma?'

Honestly, there was no reason why he should not. But Mrs. Alwyn's nature was hard to cruelty. Not even helplessness, that stirs the depths of most true womanhood, touched her. In a fit of bitter, petty retaliation on her husband for certain ills she was compelled to share with him, she had located him in the dreary north room, and no softening of mood prompted her to permit a change.

'I would rather you both stayed as you

are, Sydney,' she answered; 'altering would put me to some trouble, and—and,' under her little daughter's clear, astonished glance the lame excuse halted in utterance, 'to a—to an—well,' impatiently, 'to some expense.'

'But, mamma,' with eyes opening extremely wide, 'would a little money be of any consequence? I always thought papa had—oh, plenty!'

'*Had*, Sydney, but not has,' was the emphatic reply, 'for—shut the door and then come here by me;' and this being done; 'for, now you are clever and old enough to understand things, I may as well tell you why we left Guyswick. Your father had the fo——' Mrs. Alwyn stopped and substituted a second word for the one half spoken—'the misfortune to lose all his money, and now he has actually nothing whatever of his own.'

'Oh, mamma!'

'Nothing! So now you comprehend why I have to be careful of expenses.'

This was odd news to the child—at first bewildering. It came like a chill wind on her hopeful design, and for a minute she lost heart. Presently a side eddy, an up-wafting of observant common-sense, brought consolation.

'But, mamma, we must have some money,' she urged; 'rather a good deal too; for our house is so pretty—the prettiest in St. Clairs, Mr. Dacie said yesterday; and everything is just as nice here as it used to be at Guyswick.'

'Nonsense, child, you can't remember. That was ten times the place this is. We had a dozen servants there, and only three here!'

'But we must have some money to keep three, mamma! And isn't it papa's?'

'I have told you *no*, Sydney. All that we have to live on—and it's little enough,' (the lady spoke conscientiously, for seven hundred a year—after her delicious experience of as many thousands—seemed a dismal downfall)—'is, for the present, *mine*.'

The word shot out like a bolt to its socket. Somehow Sydney did not require the reasoning even of her eleven years to point out that the syllable cut off all prospect of outlay for her father's benefit. Instinct told her that. And instinct, which after this revelation bound her still more closely to his side, made her now say very wistfully,

'Then he and I,' curious conjunction, as if both were alien to her mother, 'have to live off your money and Leonora's! So, of course—I see—we ought not to use it. Did Leonora's father give it all to you, mamma?'

Here was a home-thrust, uttered in all innocence, as keen as any age or ability could have contrived. Mrs. Alwyn coloured under the steady, waiting gaze, and was angry with herself for so doing—angry with Sydney for causing her confusion.

But, however oblique her notions of honour, she was not going to commit herself to a direct falsehood; one, moreover, which would infallibly be found out by-and-by. So she answered shortly,

'No; Mr. Villiers did not give it to me. I had it from your father when I married him—entirely for myself, though: to use as I pleased. Now, instead of that, I have to keep the whole of you, house and everything, off it. And that is all you need know or I shall tell you, Sydney. Remember you are to repeat nothing of all this to anyone. Never mention your father losing

his property. It is no concern of anyone but ourselves. Run away now, to your father, if you like; Miss Stevens is driving Leonora to Hedyngham for her painting lesson.'

But Sydney was tenacious of purpose. Instead of going, she stood, tracing the pattern of the table-cover with one fore-finger, revolving all this information, not seeing her way past it; till suddenly a happy thought flashed out of the confusion.

'Mamma!' excitedly.

'Well?' impatiently.

'In the desk that I have had since I was quite little there is some money. I don't know who gave it to me, but it's my own. May I change papa's room with it?'

'You are obstinate, Sydney,' said Mrs. Alwyn, frigidly.

'But may I? Then papa will get the last of the sunshine always. Oh, mother, do say yes!'

Something in the imploring tone, the anxious expectancy of attitude, atip-toe, with two hands half-opened, waiting to seize consent, caught Mrs. Alwyn's fancy. It is hard to rebuff a young voice that says, 'Oh, mother!' as Sydney said it. A most rare weakness overcome her, and, as much to her surprise as Sydney's, she yielded.

'As you like, then,' she said; and the contest was closed by the victor's ruffling the pleated lace upon her mother's neck with a fervent, impulsive kiss.

So upstairs the alteration was effected, swiftly and cheerily. It needed no vast *douceur* from Sydney's slender fund to secure the co-operation of Mr. Alwyn's attendant, now with him every day; and

Maria, an active housemaid, entered zealously into the few hours' extra work, for the housemistress was no favourite with her servants; 'and,' said this one to her kitchen confidants, 'I'm right, right glad Miss Sydney's got her way, that I am. I heard 'em argufying about it till madam bid her shut-to the door, and I was mortal afraid she'd only get herself sat on, like the rest of us. Her ma seems to think she can harrow rough-shod over everyone's head, like she do over the poor old gentleman's, and it's time she was learned different, *I* says.'

By a wide, west, rose-shadowed window the old lawyer sat now, day after day, delighting childishly in the change; and, as kind Dr. Dacie commented approvingly, 'The plan was capital.' Sydney had made his evenings brighter by half than they used to be.

'Type of herself, sir, of herself,' said the father, his hand fondly upon her head, and the words emerged long after from memory, helping her along a path by no means smooth.

There was one other episode that summer wherein her mother's will and Sydney's had a smart tussle, and again the child scored a victory.

People began coming to The Dale for afternoons of tennis, or of music, for Leonora was eighteen now, and variety was as the very salt of the young lady's existence. The mirth of many voices would often float upwards to the west window, where Sydney was mostly with her father, and, though he rarely asked about these gatherings, they always seemed to bring an extra sadness to his deeply-lined face. With so many to and fro, perchance the neglect came home to him that the throng

never spared him a half-hour's guest. So Sydney interpreted his sigh one day, and, with her little warm hand stroking his white hair, asked—

'Isn't there anyone, papa, you would like to have come and see *you* some day? Anyone, I mean, you used to care for before we came here?'

She had hit on the very theme of her father's thoughts. He answered instantly, though slowly, for speech was difficult to him now, and indistinct when hurried.

'Yes, there is some one who would come if I could ask him. I wish I could.'

'Who, papa?'

'You knew him. Do you remember him, Sydney? Jacob—Jacob Cheene.'

'Remember him! Why, yes, papa. He used to carry me about at "Stuarts," and keep sweeties for me in his desk! I am so glad you want him. We'll get him here!'

And despite Mr. Alwyn's nervous, 'No, no, child; your mother wouldn't have him!' Sydney lay in wait for the first opportunity of petitioning for this visitor, only, however, to be met by most positive refusal.

'It would be no pleasure to your father, I assure you, Sydney. He can't possibly desire to see this man. He is not fit to receive anyone.'

'But he said he did really wish for Mr. Cheene, mamma; and,' piteously, 'he never has anyone at all!'

'You know perfectly well he is ordered to be kept quiet. You have heard Dr. Dacie say so over and over again!'

'But Dr. Dacie says an old friend's coming would not hurt him. I saw him this morning, going past, mamma, and ran out to ask him.'

'You take too much upon yourself,

Sydney,' rebuked her mother, frowning. Now, if this 'old friend' were not invited, it would look as if she had negatived the scheme. The Dacies' 'poor Mr. Alwyn' had had a ring in it she had not liked of late. There was little love lost between herself and the warm-hearted doctor, or his family.

'You had no right to speak of anyone's coming till you had named it first to me,' she pursued, irritably; 'I have no room for such a visitor. He was only a clerk. I couldn't have him at my own table, and I certainly couldn't have him gossiping with the servants!'

Gossiping with the servants! Not fit for her mother's table! Her father's one much-desired friend!

Sydney's temper rose with a vehement gust. A rush of angry tears filled her eyes; by nature she had every generous

impulse that in forner times had made John Alwyn such a universal favourite. Now she could have flashed out at her mother, said all manner of things more pertinent than pleasant, and ended, probably, with a burst of weeping and a dismissal to bed at the early hour of six p.m. But she recollected the old man upstairs, who, she had pledged her childish word, should have this one pleasure he seemed to covet, and the restraint of twice twelve years came over her. She swallowed a great choking and urged bravely on:

'If Mr. Cheene may come, he can have my room, and I will sleep with the servants. If Maria may set his dinner and whatever he wants in the school-room, I'll wait on him myself. Papa wishes for such a few things; may he not have this?'

Mrs. Alwyn hated to be persuaded

against her inclination; another more decided negative was on her lips when—

'May he not, mother?' said Sydney.

The word, so seldom used, dominated her spite of herself. She wavered with a gesture of annoyed perplexity, and Sydney went on, sadly:

'Hills said, when I told her I was going to ask you, it would be a pity for papa not to have just this pleasure, for he didn't get much!'

It was *naïve addenda*, but it gained her cause. Mrs. Alwyn could have boxed her young daughter's ears for putting the onus of refusal so publicly upon her. No woman of any age lets go willingly her mantle of amiability, fit it never so uneasily.

'Oh, the man must come, I suppose, if you are all so persistent about it,' she said, testily; 'and, pray, Sydney, don't go lead-

ing people to suppose I wish to stop your father's pleasures.'

So, to the indescribable satisfaction of the trusty old clerk, an invitation in Sydney's unformed penmanship soon reached him; and he needed no reiteration of her 'Do come, please, for papa wants you,' to bring him quickly to St. Clairs.

Arriving on foot from Hedyngham, he was received by Mrs. Alwyn with a dignified,

'You are very good, Mr. Cheene, to travel across the country for such a doubtful pleasure as meeting poor Mr. Alwyn. A mere wreck you will find him. Kindly excuse my having many engagements; I am taking my daughter out both to-day and to-morrow. Sydney, I hope, will attend to you.'

Then the lady bowed herself away, no whit less patronising than of yore, and

Jacob Cheene, his young hostess hovering about him in shy delight, was taken upstairs to meet once more the old employer from whom he had been parted by such ill hap.

It was a curious re-union, fraught at first with speechless pain, when the master, fallen from his high estate of wealth, mute now with struggling emotion, clasped hands with his old clerk, and looked at him with eyes that seemed to have forgotten how to be glad! Curious and grievous. For Jacob Cheene, the once shy dependent, had to keep calm and lead the way to cheerfulness, when for thoughts of the old placid past, and sight of the shattered life before him, he could have sat down and cried like any baby!

But that was only for a little while, and later on it was good to see them both, when the ailing man's state was recognised by

his guest; for then all that was bright and welcome did the clerk recall and recount, speaking more and more freely as he found, with relief, that the lawyer's memory was a mere blank on some points. So he spoke of 'Stuarts,' telling how well the house looked with its rich new tenants, and related much news, always pleasant, of old townsfolk; and if a question were put, with a touch of half-frightened recollection about some unsafe names, why, those, it so happened, Jacob Cheene had quite forgotten, or knew nothing of but so-and so—and then he led his listener on safer ground again!

Thus talked the two old men—the feebleness of one making the other seem almost youthful—till they must needs revive old stories of the wondrous music evenings; and Sydney saw her father's face light up, his fingers, white, wasted, nerve-

less, stirring to the touch of invisible strings as Jacob Cheene described that great *finale* wherein the first violin had led such a glorious *presto* as left them all exultant, breathless, fit for never another chord that night!

That was the safest theme they found. Pleased as a child, the host kept harping on it, and the next day of Jacob's visit Sydney found her father's violin ('It must have been left behind, for some one sent it to papa months after we got here,' she explained. 'Wasn't it strange?' and Mr. Cheene said it was, very!), and the much-loved instrument was tenderly laid upon its master's knees, just, as it were, for recognition, and leave to be touched by another, and then the loose strings were attuned, and the clerk played most reverently a theme well known—so beautiful it might have been some saintly funeral song.

But the delight was too vivid. It set one hearer trembling past restraint. So the notes, strange at The Dale, were silenced. Only in cautiously chosen converse of old times the rest of that day was passed, and with the morrow Jacob Cheene bade his master farewell.

Sydney, most constant and attentive little handmaid to her father's friend, went with him to the station at Hedyngham, having secured the pony-carriage by a stroke of genius (brushing Leonora's hair overnight for an hour, and getting her to ask their mother its loan!) and together they talked as he waited for his train.

'If ever chance brings you my way, Miss Sydney, though it doesn't seem likely to now, you'll be sure to come and see me.'

She promised 'Yes; that she would.'

'And you'll write to me and tell me about your father?'

Again 'Yes,' most willingly.

'For,' stopping as they paced the platform to take one more long look at John Alwyn's child, with something of a haze about his own sight—'for there never was a kinder, truer, better friend than he was to me!'

'Yes, he *is* good, isn't he, Mr. Cheene?' Sydney breaks in, her lips trembling at this praise—very sweet, though, alas! almost unheard nowadays by her jealous ears; 'he is so gentle; you don't half know *how* gentle and uncomplaining he is! and he was always—when he was well—good to everyone, wasn't he, Mr. Cheene?'

'Ah! that he always meant to be, I'll stake my life,' returns her companion; and more he cannot say, for the train comes shrieking up, he keeps shaking the little child's hand till the guard hustles him into his carriage, and in another minute he

is out of sight and out of questioning.

But that flying visit was a wondrous pleasure to Sydney's father. He talks of it morning, noon, and night for days after, always with delight.

Always but once. An evening when some fortnight had gone by, and Leonora and her mother absent in the next village at some festivity, the two at home sat together silently watching the sunset, a great piled-up splendour of golden clouds above a most peaceful sea of tender-tinted blue.

The old man had been happier, if more strengthless, than for weeks that day. But now he suddenly grew restless. Pointing with shaking hand towards the brillant west: 'How shall I—reach it?' he asked, looking straight forward with a great anxious yearning; 'won't they—stop me?'

'Who stop you, father?' cried Sydney,

springing to her feet, to draw his white head tenderly upon her shoulder.

'Why, they!' he answered, gazing forward, though the clear space was only peopled by phantoms of his disturbed brain; 'they will! Oh, how I wronged them! But Sydney,' bringing his shaking hands together with a piteous burst of grief, 'I never meant to! Jacob will tell you—why didn't he tell you when he came?—God—God—knows I never meant to!'

She held him to her most fondly, poor child, frightened herself, but hushing, soothing, quieting him; saying he had wakened up; he had been dreaming, and —there, there—he would be better now, kissing the troubled face into peace again.

'But I wronged them,' he kept half whispering, the dream haunting him still.

'Then I'll make it all right, papa,' said

Sydney, 'never fear! You are only tired. I have talked to you too much to-day, that's what's amiss.'

'You'll make it right?' he echoed, looking up at the child with most touching wonder and trust.

'Yes, that I will, father.'

'Dearest and best! You'll make it right. My little girl. My only one. Now God be praised. Help her to—to make it—right!'

He murmured that again and again, with intensest satisfaction, as he let his head slip from her shoulder to the chair, and, still with his face turned westward, fell into restful slumber.

Sydney sat at his feet, holding his hand that shivered twice or thrice, till it grew dusk and towards the time for Mrs. Hill to return for the night.

The woman for once was late. When

she stole softly in at nine, she found the young watcher sleeping beside her charge, and, with an exclamation at her own tardiness, essayed to wake them both. One quickly roused out of the land of dream. The other was beyond that land —gone calmly to a region that mortality kens nothing of.

## CHAPTER V.

### A HOME UNHOMELIKE.

With but few beats of his wide season wing, Time carried Sydney far past that summer-tide of loss and sadness into a girlhood lighter if lonelier, freer if less gladdened with willing duties, than could have been her fate if her father had lived.

Left now with his memory only, that she cherished long and truly. Tender recollection softened his patient, fading life into something sacred, and the flawless love between them set an ineffaceable mark on her succeeding days.

Years that transformed her from child to woman in no way altered the position between her mother and herself. The fact of her being fatherless kindled no fresh spark of love maternal. She had her place in the household; studies strictly prescribed. For so many hours a day she inhabited the school-room, the books Leonora had thumbed and discarded before her, and from these she was bidden to extract the wherewithal for her education. An impression was vaguely circulated that Mrs. Alwyn and her elder daughter superintended these studies, and for some few minutes each morning these ladies would indeed look in upon the child stumbling along this discursive road to learning; but as the elder came always burdened with letters or domestic accounts, and the younger occupied the half-hour she was supposed to be listening to *Lectures Francaises* in

pencilling enchanting fashions down the margins of the pupil's *thèmes*, why, Sydney could hardly be said to profit much by their company.

Circumstances truly offered her during those years ample opportunity for growing up splendidly illiterate; but such fate was averted by the appetite she had inherited with her name. The meals her scant library provided she attacked with unappeasable vigour. Her dullest lessons she invested with a species of romance—threw into her untrained labours all the enthusiasm which had no other vent, and determined not to let a power within her rust; but as her father would have desired to see her, so, and none other, to be.

At which point, however, Mrs. Alwyn's programme came into collision with her daughter's, and, widening the gap between them, earned for the girl that unenviable

adjective which to her mother's mind marked her strongest characteristic.

It was the summer when Sydney was sixteen that this noticeable difference of opinion arose.

She was a lithe, dark-eyed lassie then, with long, broadly-rippling hair it was a slander to call black, so many shades of light lurked among the abundant locks; clear-cut features, scarcely pretty as yet, and a mouth too grave and firm for her years but ready on occasion to curve into smiles that lighted the face like sunshine.

'Mamma,' she asked one morning, looking beseechingly across a pile of well-worn volumes at Mrs. Alwyn checking her baker's bill, 'what am I to do now I have finished these? Will you get me fresh books to learn from, please?'

Mrs. Alwyn paused, her forefinger on the last checked item.

'"One peck, one and ten, June the 29th." What do you want, Sydney? I wish you would avoid interrupting me. A girl of your age should surely be able to study alone.'

'So I will,' returned Sydney, promptly, 'if I have anything to study. But I really do know all these books by heart. Or I mean,' for she was strictly veracious, 'I know all I can learn in them without a regular teacher. And it's not much use my going over them again if I can get no more out of them; is it, mamma?'

'Not much; you are right there.' Sydney's hopes rose. 'But, if you have mastered these, why want more? Where Leonora left off you can do the same!'

Oh! down, down to despairing went Sydney's hopes; for well she knew how grudgingly her mother's purse-strings opened to any but channels of her own

choosing. Her face fell; her lips grew pale and rigid with the effort to keep them from twitching, like a disappointed baby's.

'"Two quarterns, tenpence. Rolls, sixpence,"' pursued her mother, settling her gold eye-glasses firmly on her rather prominent nose, and resuming accounts as though this interlude were ended.

In desperate rejection of such fiat, Sydney slowly mustered courage and spoke again.

'Mamma,' appealingly, 'you don't know how ignorant I am!'

'You said just now you had mastered Leonora's books,' chided Mrs. Alwyn. 'If *I* consider that enough, you should be content. You are sixteen now, so put aside childish lessons. It will leave you more time for other things. You play atrociously compared with Leonora.'

'I am not so clever as Leonora at music, mamma,' murmured Sydney.

'Perhaps not; but industry improves all things. Practice on this old piano three or four hours a day. The bass is nearly dumb, but that doesn't signify. You may have a voice in a year or two, then you can take up exercises. Meanwhile——'

'Yes, meanwhile, mamma!' said poor, disappointed Sydney, most dejectedly.

'Well, amuse yourself somehow. Get up your own lace, as Leonora does. Cuffs and collars give you a housemaid look; come and talk to callers; that is an essential part of a girl's education. Next spring I can take you out when I pay visits; Leonora does not always care to go. When you are seventeen there will be garden-parties for you, and so forth.'

At each unfolding of this prospect Sydney's heart sank lower.

Long had she been in the background of this routine. Well she comprehended the frets and galls engendered by an invitation more or less; a fancied slight, a two-edged compliment, one country dame's condescension, another's hauteur; silently, but with the quickness of new-springing girlish instinct, had she watched the yet unavailing efforts made to launch her handsome step-sister on matrimonial seas. Now she was to put the first step on this same unsatisfying treadmill! Alas! she had asked bread and been offered a stone! If Mrs. Alwyn had had tact and tenderness enough to say, 'I want you by me!'—if she could have drawn her child's face to her, crying, 'I'm jealous of your books!' and, with a kiss, perhaps, called her 'darling,' why, Sydney's plans would have remoulded under her will, the coveted

studies played second right joyfully to her mother's wishes.

But no such note of sweetness summoned Sydney to surrender. An unquenched spirit of revolt forced out further petition.

'Mamma, I'm not fit for calling and going out with you——'

'You will be soon, Sydney!' impatiently.

'—And I should hate it!'

A shake of the head and an incredulous smile.

'—But, if you do not care to buy me books, may I borrow them? The Dacies will lend me plenty. I've not complained to them——' hurriedly staying an angry exclamation; 'but I was just saying I envied them so many I remembered papa speaking of; and Mary said I could have them over or read them with her. And —dashing bravely on—'Mr. Vaughan was

there,' (the rector at St. Clairs), 'and, when I said some names wrong, he asked if I would be too proud to learn with his little nephews, who have come to live with him. Would I, indeed! Oh, mother, let me. I know papa'—with an unconquerable sob —'would have liked me to get on; so,'—a couple of anxious tears splashing on a well-worn 'Markham'—'so I must!'

'Singularly like "I will!"' said Mrs. Alwyn, focussing the girl with chill disapprobation. 'Well, you have taken your affairs so pronouncedly into your own hands, I can only trust they may prosper as you seem to expect. My own fear is they will make you as conceited as wilful!'

Thereupon the field was left to the victor. With this hardly-extorted consent Sydney sought the offered tutelage of Mary Dacie and the rector, gaining—plus a wider

range of work congenial—two friends than whom no girl could have desired better, though, as she saw with covert pain, neither found favour in her mother's sight.

For the Dacies, to take them first, though as simple, kindly a family as all Suffolk contained, were unpretending and straightforward to a degree that stamped them antagonistic to Mrs. Alwyn.

The Dales' new tenants had just arrived when Dr. Dacie's promising career was checked by an accident that left him lamed and unfit thenceforth for any but a most limited circle of patients, and hereon had ensued curtailment of income, a lowering of expenses, a vast change of family prospects.

'But,' said the doctor's boys, 'so long as the dear old governor is all right we won't mind!' And Mary Dacie had come back from the costly school to share first

months of nursing, then the labours of the one Phyllis they could now afford. And Mrs. Dacie, the load of suspense off her mind, her husband about again, promising 'the creaking gate hangs longest on its hinges!' thanked God unwearied-ly they were all left to each other still, and never let a care for wealth that might have been rankle in her grateful mind, or plant a wrinkle on her comely brow. So long as her good man had his Norfolk cart and steady cob to trundle him from one patient to another, the wife went willingly afoot; and if among her wide range of cottage calls she outwalked herself, why, then she would beg a lift, come smiling home in a tax-cart ('she bowed to me from the top of a truss of hay!' said Mrs. Alwyn once, with hugest scorn), with air as serene as if in her own victoria, behind a thoroughbred!

From the first of the Alwyns' residence at St. Clairs this kind woman had taken to the youngest of the new comers—the ailing father's faithful shadow. She was ready enough to be friendly to all, but Mrs. Alwyn kept her steadily at a distance. A woman of her stamp might penetrate to the seclusion of the invalid. 'Men in Mr. Alwyn's state are given to indiscreet confidences,' thought his wife, and determined he should be allowed no opportunity for such! So as the lady never advanced beyond distant civility, and Leonora was ready to ignore the existence of people who wore the same bonnet summer and winter, Sydney was the only one who grew intimate with the doctor's family.

When she was still small, she strayed one day into the big parish church and stood, inquisitive, before a fine tomb of

lord and lady, with effigies of children carved on the panel beneath their recumbent figures, one little maid in quaint garb bearing a skull in her outspread palms.

'What does *she* mean?' asked Sydney of Mrs. Dacie, busy close by with harvest decorations, and was answered,

'It means that child died young, my dear: underneath it says in Latin, "She was a daughter most sweet, most dear, whom to lose was to the father mortal pain, to the mother as a foretaste of Death's dart in her own breast." So,' wound up practical Mrs. Dacie, 'don't go home by the lower houses, my dear. There's scarlet fever there. If you caught it we might have you ending just like that little lady with the skull, you know.'

Sydney pondered gravely a minute, then turned away.

'Except that my mother wouldn't so much mind!' she said. And the naïve confession planted the little half-shorn strayling firmly in Mrs. Dacie's pitying regard.

Concerning her other tutor, Sydney retains of him, from then till now, her first impression as of some one saintly. A man he was who, having lived to past his fifth decade in a sphere of study he passionately loved, felt then impelled to change this peaceable retreat for the labours of an obscure country parish. No rich living was it Robert Vaughan took, but one poorly endowed, with scarce a being for miles round on his own intellectual level. But here a grand humility bridged what might have proved an abyss of difficulty to some. Regretting solely that his powers were such a feeble lever wherewith to raise his lowly flock, he put his soul into his new task—

fell at first into a sea of blunders; preached far and away over his people's heads; became the prey of the hypocritical, the laughing-stock of the impudent in his congregation; then, after painful labour, emerged from initial difficulties a parish pastor, so whole hearted in devotion to the power he served that St. Clairs ceased its broad jokes at his high learning, thronged his church, and vowed if every parson were like theirs, chapels might keep their bolts across their doors from year to year, they might!

Him, then, Sydney had to thank for light in worlds of lore about whose very entrance she could but have groped unaided and uncheered; and never did she leave the rectory without a deepening reverence for the master whom her mother and sister rated only poorly. For Mr. Vaughan's broadcloth was often very

threadbare, and his tact so sadly at fault that he treated any honest woman in the parish with the same courtesy he accorded Mrs. Alwyn's self!

Thus, when Sydney was twenty, her pursuits had shaped out another barrier between herself and the other members of her home. Leonora treated them with raillery; her mother as subjects in which she took no interest. And the girl grew daily, under her own roof, shyer, more reserved—or, as Mrs. Alwyn put it, more sullen.

But there was no sullenness in the wistful curve of a mouth beautifying in womanly fulness, nor in the glowing depths of those dark eyes! No sullenness. Rather a mute yearning after the something lacking yet in her existence—a silent gathering force of unused love, fed secretly by Nature, waiting with hidden wealth to

gladden the soul of some yet-to-be-discovered fellow-wayfarer.

The first stir of this something indefinable may have lent a new charm to the young face, for just now people found out how decidedly attractive was Mrs. Alwyn's second daughter, and the unjealous security which Miss Villiers had hitherto dwelt in was unpleasantly assailed.

Therefore was it that, after a huge parish gathering, whither the rector had bidden nigh the whole village come and keep his sixtieth birthday, and when Sydney had been his *aide-de-camp* from morn till night, Leonora took her anxieties to her mother and claimed help.

'Sydney was very active, mamma, yesterday.'

'Very.'

'And was a great deal noticed.'

'Naturally, Nora dearest, being always

by Mr. Vaughan. Did you observe his hat? It was a perfect scarecrow!'

'No, I did not, mamma. Mr. Bruce'—a neighbouring vicar—'asked me who the charming girl in white was—meaning Sydney. And the Countess said she had the prettiest, most natural figure she had seen for a long time.'

'Very polite of the Countess,' coldly.

'And Mr. Duvesne watched Sydney all the time she played with the school-children at that idiotic "gathering nuts in May!" After you brought him to me, he hardly spoke. I don't think he listened when I talked. I said I was tired, and would he get me some tea? And,' finished Leonora, shaking her elegantly-shaped head very gravely, 'he went quite briskly. But he never came back! Instead, he followed Sydney for an hour with a dish of heavy cake!'

This was serious.

Mrs. Alwyn seated herself for meditation, surveying the situation uneasily. Mr. Duvesne, an honourable and reverend scion of the great Comyngham family, was the man whom she was ready to move heaven and earth to gain for a son-in-law—a husband for Leonora. But it was on the cards that John Alwyn's daughter might come most undesirably to the front, and, once there, hold her own in any company. The thought that the child, unwelcome from her first breath, should oust the darling offspring of her first marriage was intolerable. The mother, weighted with uneven burden, puckered her brows, and bit her lips, and sighed, but saw no light through her difficulties—quick though she mostly was at finding the straightest road to her own advantage.

For once Leonora's unimaginative

self opened the way out of perplexity.

'It would be awkward, mamma,' she said, plaintively, 'if this sort of thing always went on. I should dislike Sydney —and I've no desire to do so. I can only think of one plan to set things comfortable.'

'Ah!' Her mother looked up, anxious, not hopeful.

'And perhaps that isn't possible. But would it not be very nice if we could get Sydney pleasantly away? Get her—married, or going to be, so she wouldn't interfere at all? Could it be done?'

Mrs. Alwyn got up and kissed her daughter rapturously.

'Done! It's the very thing! An admirably unselfish thought! I fancy I see my way. I believe I know the very man. I won't lose a day, my love, in attending to it.'

And, surely enough, that same afternoon's post bore forth the first move in this newly-suggested family game.

## CHAPTER VI.

### DELICATE ARRANGEMENTS AFOOT.

THE missive calculated to intermeddle with our heroine's fortunes was compiled with much thought and care, addressed in her mother's faultlessly correct handwriting to one 'Major Villiers, Petersham,' and ran thus :

'The Dale, St. Clairs,
'June 20th.

'MY DEAR ALFRED,

'It was only an hour ago, when talking with Leonora, that it occurred to me your visit to us, postponed these last two summers, ought surely to take

place this present one. Pardon me for not writing and pressing this before, but, as you know, with all the weight of domestic minutiæ, and the cares inseparable from the charge of two unmarried girls, my mind is always on the stretch, and I fear I am sometimes remiss where I ought to be the very reverse. Your niece and I both hope, however, that you will show you are not offended, by coming to us as quickly as possible. We shall be so glad to receive you any time you may fix. I may add, if you need further persuasion, that I have much to consult you about, much to speak of, whereon I feel that your advice will be invaluable——'

'Now that must mean,' quoth the Major to himself, taking his cigar from his lips and meditatively expelling rings of smoke as he lounged, letter in hand, upon his balcony, overlooking the calm beauty of the

Thames valley—' that certainly must mean my clever sister-in-law wants to get something or other out of me. Let me see, the last time she requested my counsel it turned out she wanted to stay at my Cousin Sarah's in Piccadilly, and to get an invitation for Miss Leonora to the Artillery Ball. The time before it was Henley Regatta: and before that—— Well,' with a great puff, 'I can't recollect; but the good lady's affection isn't disinterested as a rule. However, I needn't cry out before I'm hurt. We'll see what's on the carpet now. "Advice"—h'm, h'm!—"invaluable,"—oh! here's the place!'

'Perhaps it may be as well to name the point that disturbs me now before we meet. Candidly, then, it's about Sydney; and though she is no real relation to you, yet as you are associated with my own brother in the trusteeship of her little property

(which charge will end next year, for she is twenty now), I am sure you will not mind my troubling you with what concerns her——'

'Twenty! Is she really?' pondered Major Villiers, with another pause. 'How time flies, to be sure! And what's the young lady up to, I wonder! Got into some love-scrape, I'll be bound, as all girls do. Except my niece Leonora, by the way. She doesn't seem to hurry herself. Now, Miss Sydney. At your service!'

'It is really quite a misfortune that all my younger daughter's strongest characteristics are at variance with her sister's; but such being the case, more pronouncedly so every year, you can conceive the difficulty it is to me to do justice to them both, especially as Sydney has not that delightful pliability of disposition which Leonora inherits from her dear father——'

'"Delightful pliability!"' muttered the Major, his grey eyebrows comically raised. 'Well, well, the dead know no wrong, but poor Hal used to be dubbed as weak as ditch-water when he was alive. I suppose this is the same fact put politely.'

'I find no fault with her. Pray don't think I complain of her. She has qualities which make her much liked by some. I merely confide to you that I foresee many embarrassments arising from my two families, though each so small, especially when another year makes Sydney mistress of her six thousand pounds, and leaves me so much the poorer——'

'Oh, ho! The ladies don't hit it off, that's it in plain English,' said the Major, with a superior masculine chuckle; 'but, if my sister-in-law thinks I'm going to put my finger into that description of family pie, she's very much mistaken. Never was

able to argue with a woman in my life. They trip you up with the deuce and all of a smile, or half-a-dozen tears, and then what's a fellow to do?'

'I am so anxious for my children's welfare that perhaps I harass myself unnecessarily; but, looking to the future, I can see my little home peaceful with your brother's child alone, not (alas!) peaceful with her and Sydney. Under these circumstances, I am sure you will quickly see in what I am trusting as a remedy——'

'No, that I'll be hanged if I can!' muttered the Major, but was quickly enlightened.

'In marriage——'

'Oh!' groaned the gallant officer; 'what schemers these women are!'

'And here I think you and I may possibly arrange something to our mutual satisfaction——'

'Why,' stammered the lady's confidant, colouring up to the roots of his grey hair, 'she doesn't mean to offer her daughter to me, does she?'

'For if your son Rupert' ('O—h!') 'is still free and feeling any inclination to settle in life, I frankly tell you he would be a most acceptable son-in-law——'

The Major heaved a sigh of relief, looked grave, and read on very seriously after this.

——'You, and he through you, knowing every circumstance connected with our family affairs, would require no explanation of past events, which in itself would be a great relief to me. Sydney, if the marriage were arranged, would, I trust, settle happily into a suburban life. There would be little likelihood of her returning to her unfortunate father's neighbourhood, which I have always felt most undesirable.

Such a terrible collapse as his may even yet be remembered there. And, lastly, Mr. Rupert would secure a wife and an immediate dower, neither of which, I think, is inferior to what he may have the choice of in general society. Think this all over, my dear Major, and if your judgment agrees with mine, that the match is one to be wished, come down and talk it over with me. With *me* only, of course. With Sydney's temperament it would be quite unwise to let her have any suspicion of our plan. She has a great tendency to independence of action, but perhaps you gentlemen might like her none the worse for that. Looking impatiently for your reply, with Leonora's kind love and my own,

'Ever, dear Alfred,

'Yours very truly,

'HELEN ALWYN.'

'"The truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth!" Now I wonder if this is any or all of that,' mused the Major, treating himself to the unusual luxury of a second cigar, to assist his cogitations. 'The worst of women is, they're so confoundedly crafty.'

Then he began his letter again, hummed and ha'ed over the commencement, underlined with his massive gold pencil the fact that Sydney's mother had no fault to find with her, put a double mark under the sum mentioned as coming into the girl's control so speedily, emphatically scored the admission of what would be a great relief to Mrs. Alwyn, with rather a grim smile, and 'No question she means that! But I don't know if we ought to blame her. At any rate, it's all done with long ago!' and finally, with head well back, and steadfastly sky-gazing, he ruminated long

over 'if Rupert is still free and feeling an inclination to settle in life.'

Rupert, the one son the Major's brief married life in India had bequeathed him, *was* still free—rather more free, in fact, than his father desired. Settling in life would be a capital thing for him; the most admirable check that could be devised on certain tendencies the young man was exhibiting for going a faster pace than his means could afford. The salary of a clerk in the War Office (Mr. Villiers' vocation, for years before he had entirely refused to follow his father's; 'going out to be shot at wasn't in his line,' he said) was not calculated to keep up fashionable bachelor apartments, membership of a select club, a growing circle of town friends, and a taste for amusements, desirable or otherwise. If the allurement of a young wife, a home, 'somewhere out this way,' thought

the Major, who was fond of his riverside lodgings, and had vainly endeavoured to entice his son into sharing them—if these could attract him into the bondage of domesticity, why, then good luck attend the business, and bring it to a speedy conclusion.

'It would finely ease my mind, I know,' thought the father, a vision of such another sheaf of bills as he had lately paid off for his son floating ominously before him. 'And the boy has got his own income: not large, but I'd double his allowance—put a little on besides, perhaps; he—they—might as well have it now as wait till I'm dead and buried. And then this child, Sydney, will have—have—' (mentally doing a sum in division) 'somewhere between two and three hundred a year. Oh!' with a profound shake of the head that seemed to clench the matter, 'Rupert might indeed

go farther and fare worse. I'll take the 11.40 up and have a talk with him.'

Which conclusion reached, the Major stepped in-doors, changed his matutinal alpaca for the soberest of well-cut tweeds, informed his landlady, widow of an old Scotch sergeant, that he should lunch in town, sauntered by the waterside to Richmond, over the bridge, and off *via* Victoria to the club where he was likely to find his son discussing chops and bitter ale at one o'clock.

And, there, sure enough at his usual table in the corner of the handsome 'Junior Midlands' apartment, sat Mr. Rupert Villiers, but seemingly not in the best of humours.

His meal, only half finished, was pushed aside. His first pint of Allsopp already consumed, a second was being uncorked by a waiter as the Major drew near. So

pre-occupied was he in twirling the end of his long brown moustache, and staring at rather than studying the *Times* supplement, that his father approached unnoticed, and had sat down in front of him before he recognised with a start who was nigh.

'Why, you want a whiff of fresh air, my lad,' said the Major kindly, reaching over the table to shake hands. 'London in this hot weather is a teazer. Why don't you run down and dine with me oftener? Eh?'

Perhaps a perfectly candid answer to this would have been awkward, or, so suddenly questioned, Mr. Rupert had no satisfactory excuse ready. Anyhow, he returned only an uneasy laugh, and a disjointed assurance that he was all right—'didn't feel the heat; only happened to have a plague of the headache this morning.'

'Then that won't cure it,' said the Major pushing aside the ale. 'No, thanks; I won't take it myself. I stick to my rule. Nothing before dinner, very little after. I learnt dietetics in India, you know, and advise you to profit by my experience. But you look out of sorts'—anxiously, for the old officer was very fond of his one son. 'Are you getting late hours? Is there extra work on at the office?'

'Oh, no! nothing particular doing there,' returned Mr. Rupert, pulling himself together under his father's scrutiny, and judiciously answering the last clause of his question. 'And I'm all right, I assure you. What brings you up to-day?'

Now the Major, like many a brave man, was no social tactician. He had a trick of going straight at his mark, which sometimes discomposed his son amazingly—the present occasion to wit. Taking Mrs.

Alwyn's letter from his pocket, he tapped it, address downwards, with some solemnity, and pushing aside cruets and covers, leant forward with—

'Here's what brought me. Something rather serious I want a few words with you over. The sooner the better.'

At these portentous sentences Mr. Rupert Villiers changed colour. More than one spectral bill not included in the last over-heavy schedule he had submitted to his father reproached his memory. A horrible dread stirred within him that a certain florist's account might have got round to the Major, for he had been ass enough that season to beleaguer with bouquets a fair *cantatrice*, who never so much as wasted a thought on where her Marechale Niels and lilies and ferns came from so regularly, nor had ever repaid his costly offerings with a single special smile.

A fear shot through him that a transaction involving an I O U to one young Tufter —a friend the Major cared little for— might have reached paternal ears; and a guilty recollection overcame him that he had as good as given his word never again to meddle with a fascinating game called 'Nap.'

All these and many another qualm gave the young man a bad sixty seconds, and when the letter was passed over to him, with a low but emphatic, 'Just read that and let me hear what you have to say about it,' the fingers with which he opened Mrs. Alwyn's epistle positively shook with apprehension. But the writing and a rapid glance at the signature relieved him unspeakably. The whole quickly scanned, he breathed freely again, though a new species of dilemma was now upon him. The careless laxity of his life *en garçon* so un-

expectedly stormed, all the charms of that unfettered condition shone forth bewitchingly. All the entanglements he had just now quaked at modestly betook themselves to the background. He felt, if not opposed to the project, in no way enthusiastic over it, and showed as much by the shrug with which he refolded and returned the letter to his father.

'I've only a quarter-of-an-hour,' he said taking out his watch. 'Suppose you walk my way with me, sir;' and arm in arm, the two descended the club steps and betook themselves towards Pall Mall.

'Well?' said the elder man, impatiently, before they had gone many paces—his son's coolness nettled him. The matter had appeared to him so supremely important, *he* shouldn't have taken the offer of a pretty girl and six thousand pounds so calmly in *his* young days! 'Well,

Rupert, what do you think of it all?'

'I think, sir, it is very kind and complimentary of my aunt to wish to bestow on me the daughter she evidently wishes to be rid of!'

'Now, my boy, no joking! The letter is frank enough, and we'll treat it courteously, if you please. I've no doubt the situation is awkward. Second marriages always lead to something of the sort. But do you feel any inclination to assist in altering it? That's the question.'

'Well, you see, sir,' demurred Mr. Rupert, 'I know literally nothing of this little Sydney. I daresay she mayn't be little now, but she was when I was at St. Clairs for a couple of days five years ago. Just a slip of a girl, no particular beauty, especially beside Leonora. Rather awkward, and very shy!'

'Oh, she'll be altered, she'll be altered!'

interposed the Major, who had pondered himself into vehemently desiring the match; 'I shall see her before you make the least sign, you know, and I promise you I won't send you a-wooing unless I like the look of the fair lady. Her father was a handsome man, perhaps she has grown like him. And then there's the money to consider. Of course we must tie it to herself, but a wife with an income of her own is an excellent thing for a young man, let me tell you. You'd best not turn your back on a chance you may never get again, Master Rupert. It appears to me you treat this proposal too off-handedly?'

'And it appears to me,' returned his son, laughing outright at the elder man's evident eagerness, 'that you are determined, my dear sir, on this young person and myself becoming husband and wife! May

I ask if you've definitely determined on our wedding-day?'

'Now, nonsense, nonsense, lad,' said the father. 'I'm neither such a donkey nor despot! I'm only putting the matter before you as it's my duty to do. Why, Sydney is only twenty. If you see her and take a fancy to her, you'd have a year to go love-making, off and on at your leisure; and I should think,' with a proud, paternal look at the young man, who was certainly good-looking, though the general effect of his appearance might owe a good deal to his tailor—'I should think you could get her to say 'yes' in that time. Then we could have the marrying, take a little house up Richmond way, and I've got a few pounds I could square your last bachelor bills with, and you'd have as good a prospect in life as I ought to expect, or you ought to desire. So what shall it be?

Shall I write back and chime in with your aunt's idea, or shall I give the whole concern the cold shoulder?'

The Major had put the advantage of the position very neatly. A glimpse in a corner flower shop of a ravishing arrangement of ferns and gardenias ordered by himself the day before, and a significant salutation wafted to him by his friend Tufter, who just then whisked by in a hansom, recalled sundry very present and irksome obligations to Mr. Rupert. The governor was a good old liberal soul, he thought, with some conpunction. And a year, if he drew in directly, would give him time to get quit of some of his least mentionable debts out of his own income. He'd better make a virtue of necessity, then!

'You and my aunt are a pair of conspirators,' he said, with an air of 'Well, to

please you, I'll give in!' 'So go on your visit of inspection, sir, by all means. But, whatever you do, commit me to nothing yet by so much as the shadows of a hint. If you drop a line when you're coming back I'll meet you and hear your report. There's the workshop. This is my door, good-bye, sir.'

And the Major, well pleased with this first step of the negotiations, went back to Petersham and wrote off to his sister-in-law, fixing Monday in the following week for his visit to St. Clairs.

## CHAPTER VII.

### IN THE DOMESTIC CAMP.

Following his letter in due course, the Major arrived at The Dale on what he termed his reconnoitering expedition, and being in most matters appertaining to the opposite sex no more than what his son, with the advanced wisdom of a younger generation, would have called 'an amiable old muddle-head!' he failed at first to discover where lay the pressing need to alter the household by marrying or any other change.

But that was only in the earliest hours

of his reception, at the very onset, when Mrs. Alwyn was all graciousness, tempered with a slightly nervous anxiety as to how her overtures would be received and would prosper; when Leonora was posing as just a slightly ill-used damsel, much tried, but far too truly sweet to turn ill-tempered on any provocation whatever; and when Sydney lingered more than ever in the back-ground, with a proud and withal sad reserve, begotten of her mother's injunction just as their guest was coming—'Remember Major Villiers is no relation of yours, my dear. He is a kind-hearted man, and would very likely be inclined to make no difference between you and Leonora; but recollect he is her father's brother, not yours.'

A very few days, however, under the same roof somewhat lowered this stilted style of intercourse. In that time Major

Villiers took observations very diplomatically; made mental note of a bright, eager-eyed intelligence that never missed a single point in the old campaign stories he delighted in telling, though his own young relative, pleating her pretty fineries, or twisting her many rings about, would put in her 'how horrids!' or 'how charmings!' at exasperatingly wrong intervals; brought to bear upon the case a theory of his own concerning the impossibility of perfect amity existing between Celt and Saxon; setting Sydney down as the type of one, Leonora of the other, and secretly bestowing his preference on the first; and decided to his own complete satisfaction that the assumed element of discord in this household would become a tuneful enough keynote in that other new home he had set his mind on rearing.

At which point he offered to Mrs.

Alwyn the opinion she had been awaiting with profound impatience.

They were sitting, these two, discussing afternoon tea under the shade of a splendid lime upon the square of lawn which, bordered by a tall hedge of yew, parted The Dale from the dusty high road. With judicial gravity, and a silence betokening something important at hand, the Major had stirred his beverage, melted an extra lump of sugar, watched the small seething collection of bubbles thereupon gather and disperse, and imbibed the contents of his cup; after which, setting it down, folding his arms, and crossing his legs, he said very deliberately—for hasty speech or manner would, he conceived, be derogatory to Rupert and himself, 'Well, Helen, do you know, on the whole, I'm inclined to think that arrangement you mentioned in your letter to me a very sensible one?

Taking one thing with another, I might almost say a desirable one. If the young folks find it to their mind, I really may as well say at once I shan't stand in their way.'

Mrs. Alwyn felt as though, this first step gained, the rest would surely follow in its train. With a smile intended to convey the gratification of a mother and the gratitude of a sister-in-law, she answered,

'Now, how very good that is of you, Alfred. But I knew that though even you cannot tell the wear and tear of nerves brought about by constantly dwelling on two daughters' futures, yet I was sure you would enter into my cares. I was positive you would see no indiscretion in my writing as I did; that you would help me if you could. Thank you,' laying her hand effusively upon his arm. 'Oh, thank you so very much!'

'Well, there,' said the gallant Major scarcely at ease under such a gush of affectionate eloquence; 'let's wait and see what you have to be thankful for first. You must bear in mind I can't force Rupert's inclinations any more than you can force Miss Sydney's.'

'And that would be quite impossible!' put in Miss Sydney's mother, with emphasis.

'And right enough it should be so, I've no doubt,' returned the old officer. 'I've often heard that any halter's sure to hurt if you don't slip your head through of your own free will! Still, I must say fairly that I like this youngest girl of yours well enough to wish for her for Rupert. Perhaps as I've told you this without mincing matters you won't mind explaining how it is she gets over the traces here at home? How she and Leonora contrive to fall out?

Forewarned forearmed. Eh? She doesn't look to me an unmanageable lass.'

'Unmanageable! oh, dear no!' answered Mrs. Alwyn, hastily—that term repeated might scare Mr. Rupert. 'Pray, don't think I ever intended to convey such a thing. She is simply the complete opposite of Leonora and myself. To put it as briefly and expressively as possible, a thorough Alwyn. All our differences, all our difficulties lie in that. Nothing short of living with us would open your eyes to what that means. But, of course, I naturally strive after Sydney's happiness, and I confess I see it most directly, most clearly in a suitable marriage.'

'And you're not anxious to make Miss Leonora happy in the same way?' said the Major bluntly, but a trifle puzzled. The same end attained by the absence of either daughter he couldn't understand why

seniority should not have priority in matrimonal honours. 'There's no question about my niece being uncommonly handsome. You don't intend her for an old maid, do you?'

The gentleman was nearer the root of the matter than he suspected. Mrs. Alwyn coloured and mounted her gold eyeglasses, as she had a trick of always doing if confused.

'An old maid! Oh, dear no!' she returned, looking down and flicking bits of lime blossom off her skirts. 'There is no likelihood of that, indeed. Leonora has had more than offer from—or, well, as she declined them, I need not say from whom.' Thus the lady sailed away from explanation of these suitors' ineligibility. 'And now,' lowering her voice as Leonora appeared in the distance, 'just at this time there appears a great probability of her

having a proposal which I think would fulfil my best expectations for her. You have heard me mention the Comynghams?'

'What, the people at Oakleigh Place? The Earl's family you were speaking about yesterday? You surely don't mean my niece is going to marry one of them?'

'Gently, my dear Major. We must not think, or even speak positively about it. Only I felt I must admit you to my confidence thus far. It's the second son: the Honourable Edward Duvesne—Honourable and Reverend, for he is rector of Oakleigh too. It's the family living—eight hundred a year. So no doubt he was put in the church on purpose to get it.'

'I shouldn't have thought an earl's second son would have needed that,' commented the Major. 'I thought the Comynghams were a wealthy family.'

'Are, but not were,' explained Mrs. Alwyn. 'This earl has only just got the title, you know. The late one was his cousin, and was expected to marry some day, quite up to the time of his sudden death. So these people—they used simply to be the Duvesnes, 'Mr. and Mrs.,' not even honourable—were really, considering their birth, not at all rich, and were glad enough to secure eight hundred a year for their son. The old rector died just after the late earl, most conveniently, and Edward Duvesne read himself in at Oakleigh a few Sundays before his father came down to the place last spring.'

'And you say this gentleman is making up to Leonora?'

'He certainly seems very much attracted. We have attended his little church lately—Leonora and I. Sydney always finds something to keep her to this place.

Oakleigh is less than a mile off, the quaintest little place, and so comfortable; not half so draughty as our larger, rambling building, where I get neuralgia dreadfully. Mr. Duvesne sent us hymn-books by the clerk. He has called on us two or three times, and often walks half-way home by Leonora. Of course, I have called at the Place, and the Countess has left cards here. If nothing—if no one interferes, I believe it will end in my dear child entering the Comyngham circle. I think that would be a marriage we should have every reason to congratulate her and ourselves on. Lord Comyngham is the seventh earl, and his eldest son is single yet.'

Mrs. Alwyn dropped her glasses and drew up her still handsome figure, all her passion for position, once so grievously humiliated, ringing out in her last words: such a dazzling vista opening out for her

beautiful daughter, no wonder she undertook to rough-hew from the path any obstacle between her and the brilliant goal.

Brilliant, indeed! To the Major it seemed rather impossibly so; but it was not his place to damp her by doubts, so threading his way back through these enchanting prospects to the point whence he had started, he rather provoked his sister-in-law by asking calmly—

'Will you excuse me for being very stupid, but for the life of me I can't see why you shouldn't settle off Leonora and her 'honourable and reverend' before troubling yourself about little Sydney. She doesn't interefere with the illustrious suitor, does she?'

Mrs. Alwyn bit her lip and tapped her foot upon the grass impatiently. These elderly men were frightfully dense—what

the natives of St. Clairs would call pig-headed!

To admit Leonora the least fraction jealous was not to be thought of; so with the self-abnegation demanded occasionally of maternal schemers she took the weak point over as a private grievance and answered accordingly.

'Of course, Sydney doesn't wish to interefere. I quite acquit her of any such design. But you can see she is liable to be present whenever this gentleman calls. Is apt to be put forward by injudicious friends of her own, as she was only the other day by those people named Dacie, and the Rector, at a sort of village feast. I can tell you how presently. And excuse me for saying it, dear Major Villiers, but a woman like myself, who has seen much of the world, knows how soon a man's fancy is distracted, what trifles

sometimes upset the chances of life-long happiness. I felt I should never forgive myself if I didn't smooth our Leonora's way as much as possible; and I felt, too, that I was more than justified when at the same time I was doing my best to promote Sydney's welfare. Oh! I'm afraid this all seems very perplexing to you, a man; but I do hope you believe and trust me to be doing my best as—a mother.'

It *was* rather perplexing, certainly; but while the lady was explaining and counter-explaining herself out of the maze, and rather obviously getting her guiding threads into confusion, the Major had mentally made an honest short cut, and reached what happened to be precisely the right conclusion.

'Fact is,' he thought, 'she makes fish of one and fowl of the other, as old Alister

would have said. That's about the long and the short of it ;' and, metaphorically giving himself a pat on the back for his acumen in finding this out, he got up to close the conference with a polite speech.

'Oh, yes, yes! Naturally you do your best all round, Helen, and certainly I wish both your young folks good luck. And I won't quarrel with the part of your plan which offers one of them to my boy. Let me see. Rupert is pretty well tied to the desk, but he will have two or three clear days in August, May I tell him to run down then?'

'Certainly! Before if he like. From the Saturday evening to Monday morning. We will send to meet him, and have him driven back for the seven o'clock train from Hemynford.'

'I'll tell him, then, and you'll soon have him over. And I'm not to give a hint of

what he comes for to my dark-haired friend yonder?' nodding towards Sydney, who had just entered the garden from the village.

'Not for a moment. Not a word, please.'

'So be it. This is a pretty place, this Dale,' looking at the white-gabled house, ivy up the front, clematis over the porch, panelled doorway, and mullioned windows; 'how came your brother to own it? It looks as though it should belong to some squire of these parts rather than be a loose bit of property to a man from another county.'

'It was once one of the Comyngham residences,' explained Mrs. Alwyn: 'a Duvesne lived here for generations, I believe. But the last earl's grandfather lost heavily at cards, and I've been told that The Dale changed hands one night

over the whist table. Then it had two or three different owners, and came into the market when William was living at St. Edmund's: so as he got it cheap he bought it. You know he is always ready for a bargain by road, river, or rail.'

'And mostly makes a good thing of it, I'll warrant,' said the Major; 'well, it came in handily for you. Suits you admirably. It's lucky Mr. Russell has not been tempted by a good offer to sell it over your head, for you would hardly like to leave it now.'

'Not under present circumstances,' replied Mrs. Alwyn, with a glance at Leonora among the flower-beds; 'things have been too depressed about here for William to sell profitably. But I've made him an offer for The Dale myself, and I hope he's likely to close with it. Of course it will lessen the few thousands I shall have left

to live on when Sydney takes her own. But I think it a desirable investment for me and Leonora.' Then after about ten seconds' pause, 'The Comynghams, I believe, are anxious for it.'

'And you mean they may have it with the young lady; if not, go without it! Well devised,' laughed the Major; but Mrs. Alwyn, vexed with herself for showing her cards so plainly in a boastful moment, hurriedly changed the subject.

'Say nothing to Sydney of her little fortune at present, please. There is no need to explain till she is nearer of age; if on the eve of marrying, so much the better. I have thought it over, and I am sure this is best for all of us, Mr. Rupert included.'

The Major could only bow acquiescence. For his own part he would have preferred the girl to know her pecuniary

value before he sent his son a-courting. But women ought to understand each other best; they had a circumlocutory way of going to work over trifles he couldn't pretend to understand, and therefore had best not interefere with. So contented, on the whole, with his confabulation, he joined the young people, while Mrs. Alwyn with a satisfied smile went in to dress for dinner.

'Much of gardeners, either of you?' he questioned, noticing, as he neared them, the great delight on Sydney's mobile face, as she bent over a lovely half-opened rose, bent till it met her cheek in what seemed a mutual caress; 'it's fine exercise for those that like it.'

'Oh, will you persuade mamma so?' cried Sydney. 'I think it's work that people in the country ought to be allowed, don't you, Major Villiers? Somehow one

feels the better for the very touch of a flower,' and again she stroked the exquisite petals which she had watched day by day from their first unfolding.

'And are you of the same way of thinking?' the Major asked his niece, who answered, gracefully sheltering her face from the sun's slanting rays with a big straw fan, 'Oh, yes, I constantly feel a great deal the better for them, uncle, especially when they match one's dress so deliciously as this darling does!' and stooping, her taper fingers dexterously broke off the last lovely 'La France,' and transferred it to the folds of lace meandering down her delicate pink robe.

Sydney almost visibly winced, crimsoned, and without a word turned off to the house. Leonora looked after her with an amused smile and a little shrug.

'Now I suppose this was one of her

pets, so I've offended her,' she exclaimed. 'She is so odd. I do wish Sydney could be more like us!'

'The same song her mother sings,' thought the Major, and whether by accident or by design of Mrs. Alwyn to demonstrate the difficulties she had complained of, he heard during the next few days a great deal more in the same strain.

'May I appeal to you, dear Major Villiers,' begged his hostess, as soon as he appeared at the breakfast table next morning, 'as quite one of ourselves, will you say whether her sister's wishes, or, I may add, the wants of the household, or an engagement of her own making, a fulfilment of her own whim, should take precedence with Sydney. Perhaps she will pay your verdict the compliment of attending to it.'

'Well, all depends on what the wish,

and the want, and the whim may be,' returned the Major, rubbing his hands and endeavouring to give the matter a jocular turn, with a genial good-morning all round. 'Details, if you please, ladies!'

'Leonora particularly wants something from Hemyngford. *I* ask Sydney to drive in for it. *She* prefers staying at home to practise a so-called singing-class at the church at noon.'

'Well, with a little accommodation couldn't all be managed?' said the Major; the man of war was a most thorough-going man of peace. 'Couldn't the singing-class be put off, or the drive take place in the afternoon? One or the other, surely.'

'I require my commission executed before luncheon,' said Mrs. Alwyn, very positively, 'I should think the class can be put off, if Sydney chooses.'

'Mamma,' said the girl, speaking as if

distressed at the altercation she was driven to, 'you know Mr. Vaughan fixed noon-time, it is too late for me to alter, if I wished.'

'Then send and ask Mary Dacie to take it.'

'Her father is not so well. She has her hands so full. I should be so glad if I might ease her.'

'At my expense?' said Mrs. Alwyn, in deeply aggrieved tones. 'Very well, Sydney; if you will not alter your mind to oblige me I cannot compel you. Tell Hills' —to the servant just entering with the post-bag—' the pony will not be wanted this morning. Leonora, darling, give your uncle a cutlet. Sydney, if it is not too much trouble, will you pass Major Villiers the toast? You will excuse my opening this, will you not?'

And the ruffled hostess proceeded to

disinter the correspondence of The Dale from its leathern receptacle; turning out, as luck would have it, among papers, circulars, and post-cards, one communication that proved a fresh bone of contention.

'From that old man again,' Mrs. Alwyn exclaimed, tossing a letter over to her younger daughter. 'My dear, *dear* Sydney, will you never oblige me by letting that correspondence drop?' (Sydney stooped over her coffee, answering nothing, her letter held tight beneath the table); 'Can you not, knowing my distinct desire, leave this unanswered, and so put an end to what I disapprove?'

Sydney's head drooped lower, and the painful colour deepened on her cheeks.

'No, mamma, I cannot,' she said, her voice low, but quite clear, and then after a feint of swallowing her food, she got up, with a little apologetic gesture, and left the

room before the tears, gathering in her eyes, had time to fall.

'The sort of thing I constantly have to contend with!' said Mrs. Alwyn, plaintively. 'But don't let it spoil *your* breakfast, Major. Take an egg.'

Uneasy at all this electricity in the domestic atmosphere, Major Villiers essayed to carry off some of the over-charge by a quiet talk with the rebel, and to that intent, catching sight of her an hour after at the furthermost end of the laurel hedge, wiring a roving honeysuckle to a rustic arch, he followed her there, and with a fatherly pat on the shoulder, and just a touch of reproach in his manner, asked—

'Well, now, young maiden mine, and why couldn't you manage to put off other friends and please that mamma of yours this morning? You'll forgive an old man

for lecturing, won't you, but people of one house should try to be of one mind, my child?'

At the kindly expostulation, the gentle tone, Sydney dropped her coil of wire and turned impetuously round.

'I do wish to, Major Villiers, and I do try. But somehow nothing seems to answer! I seem born to worry mamma. Ever since I was quite little it has been the same. Leonora has been her delight, her comfort. I, her annoyance, her trouble. Just as Leonora is so beautiful and I am not,' (her listener turned his glance full on the supple young form, the flashing hazel-grey eyes, the red sensitive lips, the well-poised head with coil after coil of dark locks twisted round; and quoth he to himself, 'you're not so far off that to my mind, my dear!') 'so Leonora has naturally known how to

please in everything. I,' she let fall her hands, extended in sorrowful eloquence, 'in nothing!'

The soft-hearted Major felt very uncomfortable.

'Oh, come,' said he, soothingly, 'you are only feeling sore and unhappy now, Miss Sydney——'

'I wish you would call me Sydney,' she interrupted.

'Well, Sydney, then; so you see things a little crookedly perhaps. If you could have yielded this morning, matters might not have looked so gloomy. Now would it not have been better to neglect outsiders even, and done those commissions for your mother? Particular ones perhaps, as she appeared to want them so much.'

'Particular!' Sydney stopped as they paced out of sight of the house now down the shrubbery. And her look of distress

vanished in a gust of sudden laughter. 'Particular! oh, very indeed! I should have saved'—calculating on her finger-tips—'on sugar, seven farthings; on buttons—let me see, pearl—one dozen, I should think three halfpence! Yes, threepence farthing would have been the valuable result of my drive. Now, to spare mamma's and Leonora's pockets to that huge extent, do you say I ought to have run off from what I had promised to do, and left my best friends in the lurch?'

The Major evaded the question, preferring to ask who those best friends were, and Sydney, glowing, gave him an account of all the Dacies', all the Rector's goodness to her, ending with, 'If it were not for them I should be fifty times more ill-tempered and incorrigible! Knowing what I am, think what that means, and just consider whether I ought not to work

for them even at the appalling loss of threepence farthing!'

The Major was old-fashioned enough to be clear-headed on some points.

'I do think, my dear,' he said, simply, 'there's one thing you plainly ought not to do. That is, show up your mother's or Leonora's small economies, which I suppose they feel bound to make, for the sake of ridiculing them.'

All Sydney's nerves slackened under the altered tone. Reddening with shame, tears gathered thickly on her long black lashes. She moved on very slowly. Then—

'I beg your pardon,' she said, quite humbly. 'I know I ought not to have done it. But—but——' shaking off the twinkling drops, and clasping her hands very tight behind her. 'I do get so beside myself, so weary of it all; for this morning

is only just like most mornings. I am always clumsy, always unlucky—at home. Whatever I arrange interferes with something. Not a single taste have I that mamma approves of. Where she is lavish I should never spend. Where she is—careful, I am—not! If I could ever please her really, ever make her fond of me, I would try and try and never tire. But I can't, so I suppose I seem to give up, though I don't intend to do so. But please—' lifting a sad pair of eyes so appealingly, the poor Major felt quite a sympathetic haze over his own, 'will you forgive me for saying all this? I know it's wrong to have complained. It's horrible bad taste and very idiotic of me, for it can't improve matters. But I never said one syllable about it before to anyone—not even Mary Dacie, and I never will again. If you can forget my grumbling I

shall be most grateful. It's eased me ever so much, and perhaps—' straightening herself with rather a poor attempt at a smile, 'perhaps I shall behave better after it.'

The Major took her hand, and, with a kindly little pressure, drew it within his arm.

'I'm sure you will, if there's need of it,' he said, soothingly. 'I daresay there are awkwardnesses for you all. But do your best, my dear, and you'll get into smoother waters before long. You'll not be always here, you know. It's not to be expected you should.' (The nearest hint of married freedom he dared permit himself.) 'But as long as you live together sail as close to your mother's wishes as you can. If you have to vex her with one thing, why, please her with another. Now, that letter business. I don't want to know whom it

was from, of course; but couldn't you give in to her there?'

'No!' cried Sydney, with a jerk of the Major's gouty arm, that made him jump. 'I do want you to know who wrote it. It was Jacob Cheene. My—my—father's one old true friend! The only person here at St. Clairs I ever knew or ever saw who spoke kindly of my father to me. He came here eight years ago, just before—before—that June. And his coming was such a pleasure to papa. He was only a clerk, but they had known, and trusted, and cared for each other for years and years. He asked me when he went away to write to him, and I said I would. I told papa I was going to, and it pleased him. I know,' cried Sydney, gazing with strangely flashing eyes into the blue sky far away, as if somewhere there a visible presence were animating her, 'I know

papa would never have me give up Jacob, so I—won't! I know he would always have me keep true to his old companion, so I—will! Please, Major Villiers,' with a swift turn, and sudden pleading, 'don't be angry with me, but papa and I must have our way in this!'

Then she picked up her trailing coil of wire, smiled a half-defiant, half-beseeching April smile, and ran off without biding response or remonstrance, leaving her would-be Mentor rather inclined to put his sympathies in the same scale with her rebellious decision, and meditating, as he strolled some half-hour among espaliers and raspberry-canes, how this high, much-hampered spirit could be toned down admirably under tender influence, and make a wife out of a thousand for his son Rupert.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE COUNTESS RECEIVES.

That morning's storm seemed to clear the air. Possibly suspecting, and desiring no repetition of it, Mrs. Alwyn avoided dangerous topics, while amply contented with the opinion he had formed, Major Villiers attempted no more interference between his sister-in-law and her daughters. By-and-by, when the girls were married and away, the frets and jars of daily contact all removed, the mother would perchance deal out more kindly justice to her younger child. If not—well, Sydney

would be out of the way of any carping criticism, sunning herself in more congenial atmosphere!

So, on the principle of by all means letting the sleeping dog lie, the Major shirked any more *tête-à-têtes* for the remainder of his visit. Steered clear of aught but very general conversation. Led warily from the heat in India to the heat in town, and the advisability of his son getting out of it, and inhaling the cool breezes of St. Clairs now and again. Listened attentively to Leonora's bravura singing, resonant and metallic as machine-made clockwork, and scarcely seemed to hear the accompanying complaint. 'Sydney had no patience to cultivate her voice like this. She rarely attempts any but church music, to please Mr. Vaughan, I suppose; but it is ruinous to good style!' Admired Leonora amazingly in a great variety of

becoming costumes, mightily gratifying Mrs. Alwyn with a whisper behind his newspaper, *à propos* to a beautiful toilet in pale blue and creamy lace, that his niece would grace a countesship if ever called to that high estate; and quietly observant the while of Sydney, he marked with satisfaction that such modest gifts as usefulness and intuitive leaning to the womanly labours of a home had not with her, as with indolent Miss Leonora, yet died a natural death; but, thanks to training outside The Dale, were all lying in wait to supplement her fortune in hard cash.

So the days went smoothly enough till the last of the Major's visit was reached. Then the calm which Sydney, from a certain proud penitence at having opened her heart to a stranger, and Mrs. Alwyn from a politic desire to preserve appearances, had

set themselves to keep, was threatened with another upset.

It was the morning of a grand gathering at Oakleigh Place, for which the Major had been especially persuaded to prolong his visit. An officer, pronouncedly a gentleman, and a good-looking man, was a most desirable escort. So his journey to town was postponed till the evening train, and arrangements made to suit his departure then.

'If you will excuse it,' said his hostess, 'you shall have a sort of cold dinner, that can be ready the moment we are back from Oakleigh. You will be sure, Sydney, to see that we are not kept waiting. A new parlour-maid is a great worry, Major, which you are fortunate not to realise.'

Sydney looked up perplexed and reddening.

'*I* am to see about the servants, mamma?'

'Yes. If you've no objection.'

'But I thought I was going to Oakleigh?'

'And I thought,' returned Mrs. Alwyn, 'that as you generally care so little for these afternoon parties, and always prefer getting off them, you would positively be glad to stay at home.'

'So I should,' answered the girl, frankly, 'if it were anywhere else; but the Dacies say the gardens here are glorious in July, and I had been so looking forward to seeing them, mamma, as they invited me too, that I——'

'Let Sydney go instead of me,' interrupted the Major, 'I don't care a straw for the gardens. That's an excellent amendment.'

'Not to be thought of for a moment,' said his hostess peremptorily. 'If Sydney cannot possibly attend to my wish and your comfort, of course she goes with us.' But baffled in her project of letting Leonora shine sola at Oakleigh, and warding off comparison between the ripened beauty of her elder child, and the far fresher attractiveness of the younger, Mrs. Alwyn assumed the heavy air of chronic dissatisfaction Sydney knew so well and ached under.

'Indeed, mamma,' she said now, desperately anxious their kind guest should not think her always an evil-dispositioned marplot, 'I will show Philips anything I can before we go, and help her if you will tell me how I may. But I was wanting to say that I almost must go to Oakleigh, for I met Lady Comyngham yesterday, and she stopped her ponies and said she hoped I

would certainly be there. And I said, "Oh yes," for I never imagined you didn't want me to——'

'I must beg of you, Sydney, not to misinterpret me in that manner!' put in Mrs. Alwyn, irritably, more out of sorts than ever at this pointed politeness from the Countess, 'go by all means! Pray go! I'm only afraid, Major Villiers, you will find it awkward driving with four in the carriage.'

'Not the least in the world,' protested the gentleman, willingly. 'I prefer the quartette, I assure you. Shouldn't half enjoy myself if one were left out in the cold, you know,' with a good-humoured smile at Sydney who, on the verge at answering, was stopped by Leonora, her mouth slightly sullen, her cheeks tinged with vexation.

'Mamma, we shall be intolerably crushed

two on the back seat. My skirt certainly won't look fit to be seen. I think I had better stay at home.'

'My dearest——' began Mrs. Alwyn, but for once Sydney broke in vehemently.

'No, no, no, Norah; you know that couldn't be anyhow! And there is no need, for, mamma—I wanted to tell you last night, only Leonora was singing, and I couldn't speak—Dr. Dacie is not able to go, he doesn't get a bit better, and his wife will not leave him, of course; but they both so wish poor Mary to have the pleasure, for she has not been out all the summer. So I said I would ask if you would let her drive me, and then she could go in with our party. And may she?'

'Just another of those frequent cases where I do wish you would think before you speak, Sydney,' answered Mrs. Alwyn, slowly; she was mentally balancing pros

and cons. Chaperoning Mary Dacie, in a well-worn Sunday gown, was repugnant to her, but the plan would give Leonora space. Best agree to it then. So she ended: 'you have made it impossible for me to say "no," however much I may dislike your arrangement.'

'Then I may say "yes," mamma, and go and tell Mary?'

'If you think she requires any telling,' said Mrs. Alwyn, rather sarcastically, and with a sigh indicating she had much to put up with. Which reluctant affirmative gained, Sydney escaped to the Dacies, and later in the day, from the doctor's house and from The Dale, their respective vehicles set forth to traverse the three miles of lane and road that led to Oakleigh Place.

Thither on that afternoon converged such a stream of equipages as had not

waked up the rustics thereabouts to watching wonder for many a long year. For, as Mrs. Alwyn had explained to her guest, this Earl and this Countess were new to titles and possessions, and over and above a natural desire to shine in these strange parts, they just now had double reason for desiring good opinions in the expected candidature of their elder son for the southern division of the county.

Except as a name of long nobility and ownership, the present generation of Comyngham was little known near St. Clairs. The late Earl had hated the tame scenery of East Anglia; had shut up Oakleigh Place for years, living mostly abroad, or, when in England, on a more favourite estate in Hampshire, and had scarcely been seen personally by either tenants or neighbours.

But the incomers meant to reverse all this.

With a large family and the prudence engendered of long limited means, they elected to keep up but one country house. Their choice fell upon Oakleigh, and here they determined upon making, in this first festive meeting, a thoroughly favourable *début* in rural society.

So the gardens, kept up through all vicissitudes, were now set forth in July perfection. The house, a stiff Georgian building, with suites of stately, panelled apartments, painted, mirrored, portrait-hung, after the varying fashions of two centuries, was open from end to end. Every possible preparation was made to ensure the day passing off well.

The Earl, schooled to phlegmatic calm by serving in a permanent Government post under half-a-dozen different administrations, took the approaching reception very coolly, but the Countess's feminine

nerves appreciated the complexities of the situation, and were most actively on the alert to prevent the slightest flaw in her fête.

As four o'clock approached she summoned sons and daughters about her in the first reception-room, and favoured them with final instructions, assisted by a farewell peep at her visiting list.

'Francis,' severely dragging her husband's attention from 'Harvest forecasts' in the *Standard*, 'you know Gerald summarised that for you this morning. "Wheat promising on the whole. Oats light. Barley partial. Rain wanted everywhere." Now just put the paper down and attend to me. When you've said, "How d'ye do?" to all the people, mind and hunt up the Erpinghams, and be particularly civil. He's very crotchety, I hear, but his tenants are quite extraordin-

arily attached to him, and wouldn't vote against him on any account; so, Gerald, try and be in the way and give your arm to the Dowager Mrs. Erpingham when they leave. And then, Francis, look here' —indicating sundry dots and stars down her lengthy catalogue—'it's really quite providential, as one may say, *all* the principal people whose names begin with R and L are Radicals or Liberals. Lermits, Ransomes, Radcliffes, and so on, you see? And the C's and T's are mostly Tories and Conservatives. Now recollect that. It's a great help, though even then you'll have to be guarded. Crops and stock and partridges are really safest. Gerald, don't let the band be lazy. Tell the leader supper will be served for them in the steward's room before they go. And mind you contrive to shake hands with the men of each party as they arrive, and say you

particularly want to call on them before shooting begins. Avena, my love'—to a married daughter from Staffordshire, hitherto more blessed with offspring than income—'don't over-exert yourself. Keep on the upper terrace, and tell the elder ladies where to find refreshments. Edward and Gertrude will look after the young ones. But mind now, Edward, no flirting. None whatever, or you'll scandalise the rest of your cloth. Margaret, you and Rex must attend to the tennis. And all of you talk to everyone. Choose suitable subjects of course for different folks. You'll know the clergy by their coats and collars, and their wives always keep close against them. If they are old, ask about their schools and clubs; if they are young, inquire after the babies. Be very civil to the Rector of St. Clairs. He's a most estimable man, though he looks

shabby. And now I don't think there's anything else, is there?' running an anxious eye up her list. 'D. C. B. A.—oh, A—Alwyn. Yes, Edward, be careful not to show more attention to either of those good-looking girls than you do to other people. It might be noticed, and it's not advisable. Avena, the mother shall be introduced to you. I have no idea who they are, but they live at The Dale (which you ought to get back, Francis, it was in the family two hundred years), and seem to be people of some standing. Mrs. Alwyn undoubtedly enjoys the art of dressing well, so you will find conversation with her easy, Avena. Now, my dears, there's the first ring. Do pray put plenty of spirit into the next three hours, and as we've undertaken this "thing" let it be a success!

And a success it assuredly was, from the

arrival of the first carriage freight to the departure of the last. A meeting that well earned Oakleigh Place a character for hospitality, and marked an era for more than one of its guests.

For a long hour the roll of wheels sounded unceasingly up the lime avenue. From the yellow-bodied landau of the Erpinghams, their many-quartered shield upon its doors, to the roughest of country roundabouts, did gaily robed figures debouch under the wide north portico. A radius of twenty miles supplied the throng. Squires, squiresses, squireens, professional people few and well selected, parsons innumerable—rectors, vicars, curates—but there the line was drawn. My lady said they must stop somewhere, so they stayed their biddings at curates. An occupier of one of the largest neighbouring farms, who by virtue of eminent respectability, and a

good balance at his bankers, had ventured once upon a time to lift his eyes to Leonora Villiers, drove by the Comynhams's gate as Mrs. Alwyn turned in at the same, and this practical exposition of her superiority made her pulses beat all exultant, revived the glories of her Guyswick reign, and by a hundredfold increased the moment's proud delight. If Leonora——! Ah! on the wings of that 'if' Mrs. Alwyn's imagination took flight, and sent her in so radiant, so dignified, that as she failed not to note, eyes and lips were questioning who she was the whole afternoon through.

Thoroughly delicious was the sweet July air. A west wind softly swayed the full foliage of giant oaks and beeches, without waking one note of that foreboding rustle which tells of autumn near. The old fountains played upon the lower terrace, crowds watching the fabulously ancient fishes that

swam, glittering, within their basins. Through the splendid orangeries Oakleigh was famous for, the most courtly of head gardeners escorted admiring throngs, exhibiting proudly his masses of bridal bloom. From a grove of birch and ilex gleamed the scarlet coats and sounded the excellent music of the Fifty-first. So well did the honourable sons and lady daughters of the house obey maternal behests, that four tennis sets were always on the way, players faring luxuriously with plush-breeched footmen at one court, gardeners at another, grooms and stable-boys in Sunday best at others, to 'field' for errant balls; while lookers-on had seats of all sizes, ('never let your people stand,' said my lady, 'it makes them tired and cross!') ices *ad libitum*, a discriminating share of attention from one or other of the family, and all went merry as a marriage bell.

As to the individuals we are bound most to follow, Sydney, willingly released by Mrs. Alwyn, found her way with Mary Dacie among the wide south stretch of flower parterres, and through the domed conservatories, fragrant with waxen Stephanotis, so completely charmed with the novel scene, her face so full of bright enjoyment, and her graceful young figure so perfectly at ease, in, perhaps, the simplest toilette present, that a battery of admiring, approving glances followed wherever she went, to her companion's excessive satisfaction. ('I declare, mother, her eyes were as blue as sapphires!' Mary Dacie reported at home, 'I do wish you could have seen her! People kept wanting to wile her away from me, but the foolish child wouldn't leave me once!')

The Rector of St. Clairs was standing at the edge of Lady Comyngham's circle; he

had just made his bow, apologising for having brought with him a friend, a guest of two days only, whom the Countess had most cordially welcomed. Now, both men leant on the grey terrace wall, watching the moving, many-coloured throng.

'A sight worth looking at,' said the stranger, 'and people too. Who are those?' as a pair of figures approached across the grass. 'A lady in a blue gown, who smiles as if she didn't know what ill-temper meant; and one in white, much younger, uncommonly good-looking, but totally different mettle.'

The rector laughed as he followed his friend's glance.

'Much travelling sharpens one's skill in observation I suppose, Drayton,' he said, 'for you are very right about those two. The elder is our doctor's only daughter, and a good one she is; so good, I always

wonder she's not been stolen away long before now. The other—well, I call her child, but she's that no longer, though she brings me her Latin exercises twice a week still!—she's a young lady now, I suppose, and I confess a marvellous favourite of mine. If I'm not mistaken, there's stay and spirit in her for more than the likely possibilities of life.'

'Well, she's out of the way of unlikely ones down here,' returned Mr. Drayton (which showed him less a philosopher than observer); 'but if looks make one's fortune she ought to secure a good one.'

'Then we'll wish her a safer road to prosperity,' said the Rector, half jocose, half grave, 'for her step-sister has not achieved any grand *coup* at present, though she is years older, and, most people say, far handsomer.'

'And is this last beauty present?'

'Come this way, and I'll introduce you.'

And moving on a few yards, the Rector made known to Mrs. Alwyn and Miss Villiers,

'Mr. Richard Drayton, an old pupil of mine, though—' with a gleam of sedate mischief—'no credit to me.' And then he had to break off his friendly slanders, to shake hands, and talk the regulation two minutes with the Earl.

'Quite unfair of Mr. Vaughan, I protest, to take away your reputation among strangers!' said Mrs. Alwyn, amiably. No other gentleman was in attendance on Leonora and herself just then, Major Villiers having found in the senior officer of the Fifty-first an old comrade, with whom he was recalling Madras experiences. 'I really consider such a slur demands explanation!'

'Which is easy enough, luckily. It merely means that having head for neither classics nor mathematics, I bade Oxford good-bye in my first year, and took myself out to find a fortune in foreign parts.'

'Abroad? Oh, really!' ('Which accounts,' thought the lady, 'for your just a little unkempt, un-English look, sir.') 'And may I ask in what quarter of the world you have been?'

'South America. Chiefly Brazil.'

'Most interesting. I am sure the superb trees and plants here make anyone long for the Flora of the Equator! Leonora, dear, Mr. Drayton has actually been fortune-hunting, as he says, in the land of humming-birds!'

Leonora had taken the gentleman's introduction with rather too obvious indifference. A badly-clad, middle-aged

man, was scarcely a desirable cavalier even for a few minutes. Now, however, her mother's tone warned her to be gracious. So she donned an ever-ready smile, of which an inexhaustible stock, as even and expressive as a row of steel buttons, was always in reserve, and repeated,

'In the land of humming-birds! How most sweet! And did you find it?'

'Find—er—oh, I see! The fortune. Not I!' Leonora's gleam of liveliness died out instantly. 'No, I came back, after fifteen years, rich in experience, but very little else. Luckily a nest was provided for me here in the old country, or I might have had to go on knocking about to the end of my days.'

'A nest? You mean a home?' asked Mrs. Alwyn, while Leonora yawned behind her sunshade.

'Exactly so. A little property down in

Dorsetshire. Nothing grand, but more than I ever expected from an old uncle. At a place called Granfylde. Do you know it?'

A shadow of some disturbance passed over the lady's countenance; but she hastened to answer,

'Not the least. I never was near such a place that I'm aware of. You intend to live there?'

'Perhaps—or sell it. I've come down to consult my old tutor. He's always ready to help his men through any problem. There never was a kinder, wiser head than Robert Vaughan's.'

'Undoubtedly. Just so,' murmured Mrs. Alwyn; but her attention was all astray. The next moment she rose, and swept down, all a sparkle in satin and jet, on a gentleman just passing. 'Oh, Mr. Duvesne, can you tell us is that exquisite

tree yonder a *Cryptomeria Japonica?* You don't know? Oh, but you can see by the little cones. My daughter does admire it so. I have been wanting her to go down and examine it closely, but my foot is a trifle sprained, and I have to spare it.'

'Then will Miss Villiers go botanising with me?' said the handsome young divine, and with a satisfied blush, and a shake of her delicate grenadine plumage, the young lady stepped daintily off beside him, over the complete stretch of lawn, vastly envied by most female observers.

Afraid of exhibiting her triumph in this manœuvre by too long gazing, Mrs. Alwyn turned to swell the group of matrons about Lady Avena Massey's chair, thinking placidly, 'One is best quietly rid of that Mr. Drayton' (an opinion she lived to repent), while this gentleman, deserted, after watching what he privately dubbed,

'that extraordinarily elegant pink and white piece of empty-headedness,' took a couple of steps backwards, and was within an ace of knocking Miss Mary Dacie down the terrace slope.

'Ten thousand pardons!' he exclaimed, hat in hand. 'What a dolt I was not to look where I was going. I do hope you'll forgive me!'

'Quite easily,' replied Mary Dacie, her balance restored, her good-humour never ruffled, 'all the more so because I think you are our Rector's friend. Here he comes.'

And Mr. Vaughan joining them, they all fell talking together, and presently, with peals of mirth floating by, Mary made the very original remark that it was hard to remember, in such festivities as this, there was such a thing as trouble in the world.

'Now don't say that, Miss Dacie,' begged Richard Drayton. 'It makes me feel what a selfish brute I am for enjoying myself, when an old chum of my young days is in a most confounded plight. I've been doggedly keeping the notion at arm's length all the afternoon. Now you've brought it to the front again. Our friend here,' signifying Mr. Vaughan, 'knows all about it. It's one of his old Greek class, like me.'

'But he has lighted on worse times than you, poor fellow!' said the old tutor, sadly. 'It's desperately hard to be sure, in the very prime of life, to be stranded well-nigh helpless and hopeless. How utterly impossible it is for us to fathom the why and wherefore of such things!'

'Helpless! Hopeless!' said Sydney, softly, to Mr. Drayton; a very tender, womanly pity darkening her eyes and

trembling on her parted lips. 'Is your friend's trouble so very heavy? Cannot anyone ease him or bear it for him?'

Richard Drayton looked kindly on the young questioner. 'If I were ten years younger I'd fall in love with this girl!' he said to himself; but aloud,

'No, I'm afraid even time can't mend this matter. As he used to say in our old school-days, "he's in a muddle now, and no mistake!" But we need not worry you with the tale, Miss Alwyn, for you cannot help me any more than ourselves.'

'I wish I could,' she repeated, wistfully. And what—*what* chord of memory had been touched? The band was playing 'Auld Lang Syne,' her father's old song that he never wearied of having her sing to him in the twilight; but it was not that, or not altogether—rather a some-

thing very dim, a sound out of a long, long ago past, a ghost of some pain that flitted by and made her turn aside to hide the wave of inexplicable sadness passing over her. The next moment it had to be dispersed. Up came Major Villiers.

'Now, Miss Sydney, I'm commissioned to fetch you. Miss Dacie, are you ready? Mrs. Alwyn is leaving,' and, with hand-shakings and farewells, they separated, Richard Drayton muttering as they left, 'Alwyn, Alwyn! I know I've seen that name somewhere lately. Where can it be?'

A tide of adieux followed. In another hour Lady Comyngham was resting from her labours with,

'Heaven be praised, the thing is over! I do trust we've contented everyone!' And the memorable day was done.

## CHAPTER IX.

### SHADOWS BEFOREHAND.

Done but not by any means done with!

Curious is it that now and then in one's history a certain hour stands forth distinct, as gleaming crystal on some common earthy track, and in it lie the germs of likings, loves or plans that are to guide us for good or ill to ends, as yet, undreamt of. But Lady Comyngham's 'at home' was ordained to be one of these bright particular spots, little as such was suspected by Richard Drayton, who returned to St. Clair's rectory prodigiously amused by this, his first renewal of English

society; by Mary Dacie, who, apart from enjoyment of the pretty sight, was not sorry to get away from a crowd where she had felt herself a veritable Jenny Wren; by Sydney, though an undertone of presage ran through that constantly-recurring 'hopeless and helpless!' or last, not least, by Mrs. Alwyn, who left Oakleigh Place most opportunely supplied with fresh means of attachment to the family she so keenly desired an alliance with.

It was the morning after the fête. To her surprise Sydney found herself alone at the breakfast-table. 'Miss Leonora had a headache,' Phillips said, 'a tray was to be sent up to her and mistress in the boudoir.' So the tray was duly dispatched, and Sydney unceremoniously made her own meal by the open window with no voices about her save those of feathered songsters.

But for some altogether intangible reason, even their long, clear calls, and sweet, responsive love-notes missed something of their usual joyfulness that morning. Their warbling seemed all pitched in a mournful key. 'Hope—Hope—H-o-p-e-less!' piped forth a great, well-to-do blackbird in resonant, interrogative fifths; and 'H-o-p-e-less!' trilled back his hidden mate from the laurel-hedge. The creatures were out of tune to-day, or Sydney was. The room to herself, so often a luxury, seemed now disheartening, oppressive. The west-wind in the tree-tops made her shudder. She had an odd feeling of being so badly wanted somewhere, by someone! 'Hopeless! Helpless!' How those inarticulate syllables tormented her. Off at a tangent from them her thoughts strayed to problems of suffering, of pain such as never had and never might darken her

own days, though their sting was felt by thousands beside that one unknown, whose mere mention yesterday had left her so unreasonably sad.

But while, watching the fleecy cloudlets speeding over the blue sky, she speculated thus on questions insolvable and the great mysteries of an ever-vanishing by-and-by, minutes were fleeting. Phillips came in, saying, 'Please if Miss Sydney had finished would she go upstairs, her mamma wanted her;' and, hastily finishing her cold coffee, she obeyed the summons.

It was a small, south-east room which Mrs. Alwyn had honoured by selection for her boudoir; one of the quaintest, quite the prettiest in the old-fashioned house. Part of it, with a deep bay window, was over the porch. Another window looked over the rich swaying crops of the Suffolk acres to the billowy green of Oakleigh

Woods beyond. Each way the view was charming, and all within matched everything without.

On the walls hung a few choice paintings, oval framed, small but excellent; on the china-tiled hearth stood a great pink flowering pelargonium that reached its blossoms up the satin draperies of the mantel-piece above. There rested a dainty time-piece, with a Puck-faced Cupid swinging for a pendulum, and over the glass which shaded this smiling love-god at his labour, a shepherd and shepherdess in purest Dresden politely offered to each other fruits and garlands. There were Sèvres cups too, and choice bits of Benares brass upon the shelf. Mirrors, whose deep-cut edges gleamed and scintillated like gems in the morning light, with flowers cunningly arranged to admire their beautiful selves therein. A soft square of

deepest crimson Axminster on the polished floor, a rug of restless, rich-tinted ostrich feathers in the bay, just meeting one small couch, which, with three most languor-begetting easy-chairs, formed the only seats the small apartment could well contain. There was no article, no ornament which was not choice of its kind, for the entire establishment, as Mrs. Alwyn was fully aware, owed much of its prestige to this boudoir of hers, a feminine sanctum, as entirely different from the slipper-bestrewn dressing-rooms of well-to-do halls and manors round about, as it was from the stiff, much-'antimacassared' state of the ordinary rural drawing-room.

To this elegant and inner privacy of The Dale most of its mistress's circle had, on one pretext or other, been introduced, and had gone away more or less impressed with the importance of a lady who counted

such a room among her daily needs. Here, this morning, some visitor was evidently expected, for Leonora, not in the usual cambric wrapper of her first uprising, but in a long dressing-gown of blue cashmere and écru trimmings, was lying, *bien arrangée* like some lazy young queen, upon the sofa; her mother in an admirably careful negligé of claret silk and serge, was putting some finishing sprays of acacia in the wall baskets, and on the octagon table, all gilt and ebony, the breakfast equipage was replaced by sundry cedar boxes containing coil after coil of lace.

The morning sun athwart the room set every vantage point a-sparkling. A soft breeze just swayed the curtains, bearing up a breath of mignonette and jasmine from below. Often as Sydney had entered the room at the same hour, it struck her now —in contrast perchance to her late fit of

musing—with a sense of its abundant ease, and with her foot upon the threshold, she stopped, saying frankly,

'Mamma, how pretty! Your boudoir grows always nicer and nicer!'

'If you hold the door open and let the wind blow half the brackets down, Sydney, I fear it will not improve very fast?' returned Mrs. Alwyn, never ready to be pleased by Sydney, even with a compliment. 'But now,' mollifying, as her daughter promptly amending the momentary neglect, came forward, appreciation in each glance hither and thither, 'I want you, my dear, to help me with something for a very few minutes, *if* you are not too much engaged.'

Sydney blushed furiously. Oh, could her mother only have let old wounds heal, how much more easily they could have jogged on together!

'I am free enough to do anything you

want till noon,' she said, 'and after then if you will only say you want me, mamma.'

'Which I shall not, thank you. All you have to do now is just to look through that box of lace. Carefully, please; the more valuable the more fragile it is. I want some Mechlin which I am certain is there somewhere. Leonora thinks in the square box. She would have hunted it up, but the sun made her eyes ache yesterday, so she is better resting.'

'Poor Norah!' commiserated Sydney, smiling sympathetically at her sister, who, for all her malady, looked very well at ease in her becoming déshabille: 'I'll do it instead of her, but I don't know half so much about lace as she does. I'm not very positive about Mechlin.'

'Then take this for your guide,' and Mrs. Alwyn spread on the black table a splendid handkerchief, 'but the piece I

want is not nearly so deep as this. Still, I fancy Lady Avena Massey is not furnished with too much even of that, if one may judge by her chagrin yesterday.'

'Lady Avena? What has she to do with it, mamma?' cried Sydney, searching diligently on among pieces of all lengths and breadths, from 'baby' Valenciennes to Brussels point a duchess might have envied.

'Only what you would have heard if you had not hurried off from the dinner-table last evening to go and gather strawberries for those Dacies!' ('It rained in the night though, mamma, as I expected, and the fruit would have all been spoiled,' apologised Sydney.) 'Merely that Lady Avena was rising from her chair, where she had been talking most agreeably with me, and a wretched clumsy young woman's sunshade on the other side caught the lace on

that beautiful little fichû (one her mother gave her, I've no doubt,) and not tore, but absolutely jagged it off for fully a yard. Poor Lady Avena looked so vexed, and the young woman all but cried. Of course, Lady Avena got round in a minute, and declared it was no consequence; but, as she said ruefully to me as she and I walked away, 'We know that old Mechlin is not to be had every day, do we not, Mrs. Alwyn?' So then of course I made haste to tell I had absolutely plenty of it, and I believed exactly the same pattern, and she must permit me the great pleasure of repairing this damage. She wouldn't hear of it at first, not till she saw I should be hurt at refusal; then she yielded, and her maid brings the torn piece this morning for us to match; Lady Avena would have come herself but she leaves to-day.'

Here was the mainspring, then, of her

mother's great complacency this morning. Here the cause of the projected audience in the boudoir. Not being admitted to her mother's confidence, Sydney could only dimly suspect the reason of her great anxiety to promote their intimacy with the Comynghams, but she could esily see how this courtesy—this really valuable gift—could be made helpful to such an end. Whether the game were worth the candle was not for her to calculate. Upon herself it seemed to have no more direct bearing than the temporarily pleasant one of putting Mrs. Alwyn in excellent humour, a mood she further promoted by genuine, if indiscriminate, praise of the beautiful fabrics she was fingering.

'How lovely this Valenciennes is, mamma! It looks so innocent with the little dots all over it. It's as fine as cobwebs. I should be afraid to wear it. I

like it better than this'—unfolding a superb stretch of different make. 'This is not Mechlin, is it?'

'No—gently, child; it is Alençon point. I don't imagine the Countess herself could match it. Be careful.'

'If it is so tender, mamma; I had best put that which we don't want straight back into the boxes, had I not?' questioned Sydney, prudently anxious to put these treasures safe out of reach of pins and buttons; but,

'No; just lay them across that chair,' her mother answered; 'I can replace them afterwards. If we are not quick the maid will be here before we are ready.'

So squares and flounces, collars and kerchiefs, were spread in fine array over the satin cushions. A filmy heap of Mechlin was collected, the pieces likeliest to match laid aside on Leonora's dark robe; and,

'*What* a quantity!' cried Sydney. 'I never saw it all out before. Why, mamma, it must be worth tens or scores of pounds.'

'If you said hundreds,' returned her mother, suavely, 'you would be more correct. Lace was a weakness of mine when I could afford to have weaknesses, Sydney, which, however, is not since you can remember. These are relics of times when I was not doomed to think twice over every pound I spent.'

This was a dangerous reminiscence. Sydney became confusedly silent. Her mother sighed. The moment's retrospect pained both, though differently. A tap at the door was welcomed with relief; and Phillips entering to announce that Lady Avena Massey's maid was below with a note, drove the impending gloom from her mistress's countenance.

With her blandest aspect to the fore again :

'She may come up here,' said Mrs. Alwyn.

Then ensconcing herself in the yielding depths of the very easiest chair, she mounted her eye-glasses, cast a rapid and thoroughly satisfied glance around, saw that the coming scene was 'mounted' to perfection, and hastened to be rid of just the one figure which she intuitively felt might prove *de trop*.

'Sydney, while I see this person will you write out the list for Mudie's? The catalogue is on my dressing-table.' And as her daughter disappeared by one door, the stranger-servant entered at another.

If Mrs. Alwyn had calculated on the graceful picture exciting the admiration of her aristocratic friend's messenger, she was not disappointed.

The woman, despite the stolidity of aspect good training is supposed to impart to her class, fairly stared open-mouthed at the dainty elegancies of the tiny room. Her gaze first falling on the piles of all but priceless finery, next on Mrs. Alwyn, next on Leonora, she uttered an all but audible 'Oh!' before she so far remembered herself as to make the regulation greetings of respect.

This was delightful. Mrs. Alwyn well knew the influence of the back stairs, and felt assured such a report of her surroundings would return to Lady Avena as would satisfy her that her reverend brother would take a wife nurtured to delicacies equal to any his circle could afford if he chose Miss Villiers.

With most dignified condescension the young lady's mother stretched forth her hand for Lady Avena's note, and prolonged

its reading that the bearer might have more time to satisfy her evident capacious curiosity.

'Feel so greatly indebted,' murmured Mrs. Alwyn, scanning her missive half-aloud for Leonora's benefit. "So ashamed to trespass on your kindness. Trust you will on no consideration rob yourself. Very best thanks. Remembrances of our united circle. Yours most truly, Avena Massey." Sweet name Avena. Now,' laying aside the note, and motioning the servant to the table, 'if you have the pattern I think we can match it here. Your mistress is afraid I should rob myself, but I do not think there is much risk of my doing so.'

'I don't think there is, indeed, ma'am,' said the maid, with emphasis. Then she brought forth the torn fichû, and with some nervousness—for certainly her fin-

gers trembled—began to compare it with piece after piece, scarcely able to stifle an exclamation when now and then something especially rare was shaken out.

Mrs. Alwyn was supremely gratified.

'You are a judge of these things, no doubt. Of course, your mistress has much superior to this, though.'

'Oh! no, ma'am. Nothing to compare with it. Her ladyship mostly dresses very plain.'

'Exactly my own taste!' agreed Mrs. Alwyn, better pleased than ever. 'Buried here in the country, I rarely use any of this,' tossing a heap of 'Brussels' carelessly aside, 'they lie away useless and half-forgotten; but, perhaps,' with a visibly-suppressed smile and glance towards her daughter, 'others may care for them. They may be wanted and worn again some day.'

'If your young lady has to have a wedding-gown soon,' said the woman, taking the hint instantly, 'you can give her as good as a princess's without going far to fetch it, ma'am.'

('She has certainly heard some gossip in the servants' hall,' thought Mrs. Alwyn elated, 'family affairs are always known there sooner than anywhere!') 'Well, whenever it may be required,' she said aloud, very graciously, 'one important item of Miss Villiers' trousseau will be ready.'

'And leave plenty for Miss Sydney too, ma'am!' said the woman. At whose mention Mrs. Alwyn bethought herself of rather a clever stroke. Things looked so promising for that secondary scheme, she might advantageously send forth a hint of it; then any incipient fancy of the Honourable and Reverend Edward's would be nipped in the bud. So,

'Miss Alwyn can easily be spared sufficient,' she said, 'and indeed,' significantly, 'I don't know that I shall do amiss by selecting some to-day, as it is likely to be wanted before very long.'

The woman looked up from her search interested, but Mrs. Alwyn was not going to commit herself to particulars. So she adroitly quitted the subject.

'Leonora, love, will you look at the Mechlin I laid out by you. Has not the longest strip a double thread round the edge, with little loops and sort of trefoils in the scallop?'

'Yes,' Leonora, dropping *Le Follet* to examine, thought it had, and, holding it languidly up, 'would this length be sufficient?'

Her mother and Lady Avena's maid drew near to pronounce the match on close inspection perfect, and the servant, despite

an intimacy with the jewel case of an earl's daughter, bestowed what Mrs. Alwyn took for keenly appreciative glances on the four splendid hoops, pearl, diamond, sapphire, ruby, which adorned the young lady's white hands.

The quest ended, nothing remained but to fold up the parcel, but even this last minute Mrs. Alwyn utilised to her own purpose.

'Lie down again, dear Leonora. My daughter felt the heat so much yesterday. You will tell Lady Avena we are all well with this exception. (Then someone must call to inquire for her,' she meditated rapidly, 'Mr. Duvesne most likely!) Take some eau-de-cologne, darling,' pouring it freely on hands and handkerchief from an immense gold-stoppered bottle. 'If Miss Villiers *should* depart with all these,' sweeping up the festoons of lace from the satin-

backed chair, and referring with motherly benignity to the maid's former speech, 'I must see that she goes where she will be well taken care of. Anything less than what she leaves would be quite impossible for her.'

'I haven't a doubt of it, ma'am,' was the reply, the speaker bending to tie her parcel.

'You are ready now? Assure Lady Avena I shall not even miss what I send her. And—oh! mind, mind my Chelsea boy!' as an abrupt turn jeopardised a piece of eighteenth century ware, 'I couldn't replace it for fifty guineas! It's safe now. You will go down into the hall, please. Phillips will show you out. Good-morning.'

Sydney was just coming from her own room as this early visitor quitted the boudoir. Not particularly wanting to meet

the stranger she drew back, and, herself unseen, was witness of a most inexplicable pantomime. For the stereotyped respectful aspect of the woman changed as she closed the door behind her. With a fierce scowl of bitterest anger she clenched her hand, and, her teeth hard set, seemed furiously to menace the room she had just left. Catching her breath she seemed barely able to restrain vituperation or sobs. One foot raised, as if she could have stamped for very passion, was only brought silently down by an effort that set her trembling from head to foot. But a sound in the hall below seemed to recall her to her senses. With one great, quivering breath she steadied herself, swept the back of her gloved hand quickly over her eyes, and, rapidly descending, left the house.

'I wonder, mamma,' Leonora was saying as her step-sister entered, 'how that

servant knew Sydney's name. Did you notice it?'

'Picked it up from fellow-servants, of course,' was the quick rejoinder. 'Now rest quietly, my dear, while I make haste to Hemyngford. Leonora had best not be disturbed, Sydney, till I come back.'

So Sydney was left with only her own counsel to consult over that curious interlude on the landing, and, since she could not possibly either fathom or amend the woman's singular excitement, she did her best to put it from her mind. It might have been illness, she thought. It *could* have nothing to do with any of them at The Dale.

But it had!

## CHAPTER X.

### BRINGS A WOOER TO ST. CLAIRS.

Mr. Richard Drayton's two days at St. Clairs lengthened under hospitable pressure into a week, and in that time it naturally fell out that he saw something of what Mr. Vaughan called his 'lay-vicars.'

'A multitude of small works mostly go to the women of such homes as mine, Drayton,' said the grey-haired rector to his quondam pupil, the morning after the gathering at Oakleigh Place; 'and I give them over to those two you talked with yesterday. They can help a man of my years, you know, without being suspected of

wanting to marry him! That Sydney Alwyn's adaptability is most amazing; give her anything to do for anyone she likes, and she draws to the task like a needle to a magnet. And the other is an invaluable girl—well, not girl exactly, for she is ten years Sydney's senior——'

'And how old may *she* be?' interposed Mr. Drayton.

'Twenty or thereabouts. So I'm rarely fortunate to have such assistants.' (The last thing to enter the rector's head would have been any explanation of how his own deeds had earned him these willing services. That Mr. Drayton might find out!) 'But mind you, every man hasn't such luck, and recollect when you map out your home, Drayton, you're not so fond of letter-lore as your old tutor, so furnish yourself with something that will brighten all your evening-tides.'

'Meaning a wife?'

'Right. And when you're determined to take one, come here——'

'To find her!' Mr. Drayton's brown face reddened.

'No!' laughing. 'But to hear the rest of a bachelor's homily on married life! Who's there?'—a soft tap sounding on the study door—'Come in. What, you!' as Sydney Alwyn entered, a basket of big strawberries in one hand, a bunch of honeysuckle in the other. 'Surely now you are not come up in this heat just to bring me those!'

'Not that alone,' Sydney answered, setting down her freight to shake hands with Mr. Drayton, 'for I promised Harry and Ben to come and help them with their Euclid. At least,' blushing, 'to do it with them. They expected to be at lessons again to-day.'

'Instead of which I've stopped their industry,' said Mr. Drayton; 'a drone in the hive, I ought to be off.'

'Nonsense!' cried the rector, 'they are a pair of lazy little rascals. I set them their work hours ago. They ought to have stuck to it without me. But I suppose,' to Sydney, 'they haven't?'

In honesty she had to shake her head.

'Playing!' with a groan, 'as if there were no examination coming on in September.' Scholarships for these two orphan lads lay heavy on the rector's mind just then, and he looked vexed. Sydney as little liked to see him troubled as to see the lads, her very good comrades of four years, in disgrace, so she hastened to bespeak their pardon with a lurking smile.

'Harry has been the soul of industry,' she said, 'in—drawing cats! He's sketched

the tortoiseshell in fifty attitudes; Ben has written a poetical pendant to the picture, praising pussy's extraordinary mouse-catching powers!'

Hereat her hearers broke out laughing, and Sydney went bravely on.

'So they are to be forgiven, please. They are to make up for lost time next week. And as Mr. Drayton will be here, and of course you must be with him, may I come down and be with the boys each morning? They say they want me.'

The rector gave a covert glance at his friend. ('Just a device of that deep young person's to set me free,' he explained afterwards, 'the lads work like Trojans if she's present!) Oh, come by all means,' he agreed, 'and I'll luxuriate in gossip with this man. But stay'—as with this permission Sydney would have left—'are you going by the Dacies'? Then will you take

*The Standard* and these club papers?' (It was a poor folks' club, mainly kept afoot from the rector's pocket, one of the few certain props of the doctor's lessening income.) 'They've come to me in a muddle, but I'll look in on Monday and set them straight.'

'That's how you are going to luxuriate, is it?' laughed Sydney. Then setting the honeysuckle in a plump brown jug, always ready for the flowers she so often brought, and bidding him be sure and eat his strawberries—for he had a great trick of forgetting his food or giving it away—she was renewing her good-byes when Mr. Drayton was seized with politeness, and insisted on carrying the account-books as far as the Gate House; he had seen Dr. Dacie once, and promised to call to-day, so off the two went together.

The gentleman opened the conversation

quite cleverly as soon as the Rectory door was closed.

'Mr. Vaughan,' said he, 'seems to find plenty to occupy him even in this sleepy little place;' and Sydney, her lips easily unlocked on such a theme, waxed eloquent over the wide labours of their mutual friend; telling of his goodness to the lads under his roof, and to herself, with an animated warmth which was—so Richard Drayton thought—extremely girlish and extremely pretty. He brought her to a check, though, by saying Mr. Vaughan had boasted of having her to help him.

'Me!' cried Sydney, with a strong suspicion she was being made fun of—her home experience had ingrained in her nature mistrust of her own powers—'Me, indeed! I am afraid,' furtively eyeing this middle-aged flatterer, 'you are joking!'

'Not at all,' Mr. Drayton hastened to

answer her, 'I have been hearing of your good offices in countless ways—yours and Miss Dacie's!'

'Ah! Mary's now,' said Sydney, instantly acquiescent. 'She *is* worth something! Why, Mary Dacie is right hand to father and mother, and rector, and I don't know whom besides. She is the cleverest of managers and the very best of daughters, and knows all about blankets and calicoes; and she can dispense too, she's half a doctor, and,' blazoning out her friend's perfections with a triumph that lighted and yet softened all her own features, 'she is not like any one else I know; she is a heroine!'

'Have Miss Dacie's lines lain much out of the common, then, to earn her such a title?' asked Mr. Drayton, vastly enjoying his companion's enthusiasm, and quite ready for more of it.

Sydney turned to him her whole earnest face. 'She has just lived through all her girl-years without the least share of such pleasures as most girls have. And all through she has been just what I told you, without ever flagging. They had a great trouble, you know, once, when Dr. Dacie was so hurt. Now, I'm afraid they have a great many cares. Perhaps I ought not to talk of them, though. But whatever comes, Mary is always bright, always brave, always patient. That's why I call her a heroine.'

'Always patient, always brave!' repeated Mr. Drayton. 'Ah, I suppose that combination does make a heroine—or hero.' And astride that phrase his thoughts seemed silently to travel for some seconds, whither, strangely enough, Sydney followed unerringly.

'You are thinking of that—was it a

school-fellow of yours?—you told me of yesterday.'

'Yes. How did you find that out, Miss Alwyn?'

'Because I have been thinking of him too, this morning. Perhaps—' hesitating, for she was on totally unknown ground—'whatever his losses are, they may turn him into a hero. He may be glad some day he had them.'

'H—m!'—Mr. Drayton smiled grimly—'I can't imagine the dawn of that day yet. I'm afraid it's easier for such as he to be brave than to be patient. And he's lost——'

His money, all of it?' Sydney questioned; even her knowledge of life told her how often that was the base of mankind's woes.

'Not money alone. Worse.'

'*Not*,' she felt impelled to ask on, 'not

some one—or—no, not the only person he loved?'

Such an innocent lighting up of her own heart's depths was here, Richard Drayton could have smiled at this revelation, so purely womanly. But he answered gravely—

'No, no, it is not that.'

'Then,' said Sydney simply, with much relief, 'he can't be hopeless;' with which dogma they turned in at the Dacies' gate, and Mary, watching their approach, thought the girl had caught some new charm even since yesterday, and wondered if this Mr. Drayton, looking down upon her, saw it too. Then her own reflection, very visibly thirty, in a much-worn dress, gleamed upon her from a mirror, and she turned away with a rising pang. Compared with Sydney, oh, how old, how plain she looked! For once she determined,

with unusual shrinking, she would not go to meet her girl friend and—the stranger. They could do without her! But, alas! for her plan, the next moment her father called. Here were club papers she must take care of, all to be examined before the rector came on Monday; so, with her most rare qualm of jealousy quelled by Sydney's kiss she shook hands with Mr. Drayton, and while Dr. Dacie hunted out his leader in the newspaper, explained pleasantly how Miss Alwyn 'spoils papa by reading to him every day at noon, because his sight is rather bad, and I have not always time,' and then slipped unobtrusively away to lure back her cheerfulness among household cares, leaving the caller, by special permission of the doctor and Sydney, listener to the morning news, observer of the delicate neatness of all the well-worn furniture about him, as last

night's hot debate was gone through, emphasised by growls of assent or grunts of disapproval, according as his host's political proclivities were tickled or tormented.

That noontime reading—one of Sydney's grateful new ways to pay her old debts to the Dacies—must have been to Mr. Drayton's taste. On three successive days in the next week he appeared at the Gate House by Sydney's side, the two always, as Mary Dacie, with a faint aching not to be stifled, used to notice, in lively conversation, and on the last day he even took his leave with her, claiming her company from the doctor's house to the very gate of The Dale, and they grew in a manner confidential.

'Mr. Vaughan,' he told her, as they went along, 'wants to put an end to my going abroad again. Old roving habits

pull hard, Miss Alwyn. Yet his counsel is always wise. Which shall I do? Go or stay?'

'Stay, certainly,' returned Sydney. 'There's no place like home.'

'But suppose I haven't a home? Only a house?'

'Make haste and find whatever you want to—improve it.'

'And you think'—with a side-glance as if on her answer much hung—'you think I might—by-and-by—when I've turned myself round at Granfylde, find what I want to that end?'

'I really do.'

'Then,' said Richard Drayton, a sort of shy pleasure beaming over his honest, sunburnt face, 'yours be the casting vote, I'll abide by it. When I've looked Granfylde over and know how I stand, I shall be paying St. Clairs another visit.'

'And I'll promise you one welcome,' said Sydney, a speech he answered with such a farewell handshake as left her fingers tingling for ten minutes. Certainly they understood each other extremely well.

From her boudoir window Mrs. Alwyn could see, on the other side of the laurel hedge, a masculine felt accompanying Sydney's white summer straw. With a disfavouring frown she watched the retreating shoulders of her daughter's escort, asking, as Sydney entered irradiated with some pleasant thought,

'Is that singular friend of Mr. Vaughan's never going to leave? He fastens his society on you in a very persistent manner, one might say "ill-bred," as he is a perfect stranger.'

'He never feels that with me, mamma,'

apologised Sydney, prompt in defence, 'being both Mr. Vaughan's friends, we seem quite used to each other. The boys say he is a capital fellow, and I think they are right.'

Leonora looked scandalised; Mrs. Alwyn, affronted.

'I consider, Sydney, that your mother's opinion should certainly outweigh that of a couple of raw boys! *I* look on this Mr. Drayton as inquisitive and ill-mannered. Pray, did he investigate the different parts of England you have lived in, as he did with me on Friday?' (a stretch of imagination justified under Mrs. Alwyn's private code of the admissible).

'No, indeed, mamma, he did not. We have only talked of St. Clairs and —well, just the people we both knew

here. Nothing else. And Mr. Drayton leaves to-day, so he won't annoy you any more.'

The last intelligence was welcome; a wafting away of uneasy mists invisible to other eyes than Mrs. Alwyn's. So Sydney got lightly off for her misdemeanours, and her mother resumed the grand suavity which became her so well before the after-luncheon hour was disturbed by a visitor.

This was Mr. Edward Duvesne, bearer of the expected inquiries as to Miss Villiers' health, and of a message from the countess, over which Mrs. Alwyn silently sang pæans.

'Could she with her daughters spend an hour or two at Oakleigh Place on Saturday? She had had no time to see through the gardens properly last week. Lady Comyngham so much hoped they would

pay her a second visit while the place looked well.'

Here was a flattering discrimination, an appreciative calling to come forth from the common herd of last week's visitors, and be honoured by reception into the inner family circle, that rejoiced every ambitious nerve in Mrs. Alwyn's system. Of course she would go. No imaginable engagement would have kept her away. But instant acceptance would have been *infra dig.* So the eye-glass went up to mask too evident satisfaction: a well-simulated uncertainty compelled a hunt through the dainty morocco 'engagement' book, and at last the 'Thanks, I think we are free on Saturday. We shall be very happy,' was delivered with the best assumption of just moderate gratification Mrs. Alwyn could master. 'Nothing at least,' she amended her acceptance, 'to deter my elder daughter

and myself. Miss Alwyn *must* remain at home unfortunately. We positively'—with an expressive glance at Leonora—'could not take Sydney away. Rupert would think it strange—a son, Mr. Duvesne, of the Major Villiers who was at Oakleigh with us. By marriage my nephew, but no relation to my younger daughter—er—at present. Lady Comyngham will kindly excuse her, I am sure.'

And as the young lady was not there to speak for herself, being upstairs construing Cæsar for her class-mates' edification, that was the reply Mr. Duvesne bore away some half-hour later, bearing also, as Phillips opening the hall door observed, with a secret snigger, a 'Madame d'Arblay' carnation worn by Miss Leonora at luncheon. ('Hadn't the countess that shade? Then would he take it to her?') And Mrs. Alwyn announced to Sydney, 'Leonora

and I go to Oakleigh Place on Saturday, so I must depute you to receive Mr. Villiers. He writes asking for a peep of the country. I don't fancy he is very robust, so I hope he may enjoy the change, poor fellow.'

Accordingly on the day fixed Mrs. Alwyn drove off with her elder daughter, Leonora, a most artistic study in cool draperies, a bunch of innocent-eyed jasmine on her bosom; and Sydney, the road paved to possible liking by pre-secured pity, was left to meet the guest whose coming concerned her so much more closely than she yet divined.

Highly contented as the Major had gone back to town, he had wisely refrained from over-praise of Sydney in any form. A hint or two that might come in useful as to her disposition he had given—'Docile in reality, I'm positive, but not common-

place "yea, nay," you know. Drive her with the snaffle and not with the curb, my lad! her mother uses that too much'—but her personal charms he passed over with 'You'll see her soon, and I needn't describe her:' so the appearance of his young hostess took Mr. Rupert as an agreeable surprise.

As the Hedyngham cab turned in at the leafy sweep of The Dale grounds, she came to meet him from under the drooping lime-boughs, the gracefulness of ready greeting in her slender summer-clad figure, the slight embarrassment that flushed her cheeks and darkened her serious eyes melting quickly as she fancied she detected in the new-comer that delicacy which her mother had foreshadowed.

Handsome after the type of his cousin Leonora, whom he immensely admired,

she might not be, but well-bred to the most careless observer, with 'points that gain upon a fellow every time he looks at her, you know!' Ah! it took very few seconds for Mr. Rupert to decide this prize was worth pursuit, and, with the pleasant pendant of 'six thousand,' should be his in due time.

So he made the most of the mood in which she met him. '*Was* awfully tired. Town with the thermometer at ninety was slow suicide, but labourers couldn't choose localities!' and after he had disposed of travelling-dust he re-appeared under the lime and took his tea with a wearied-out sort of enjoyment in the restful hour, that gave no hint of others neither so early or so healthy, which had emptied his pockets and paled his complexion of late.

Apologies for Mrs. Alwyn's absence

were received with great equanimity.

'It's best to take one's pleasures by degrees,' said Mr. Villiers, 'and one's relations too, though I'm not clear if I may claim you in that list. What is the etiquette of step-cousinship? Does it allow me to say "Sydney," for instance?'

'I don't think you called me "Miss Alwyn" four years ago,' she answered amused at this point of ceremony. 'Speak to me as you do to Leonora. Treat us alike.'

'Then it will be "Sydney." Thank you. I can treat you both alike, so far. But as to four years ago being any precedent, why, four years are a gulf at your age. You have grown out of knowledge since then.'

'In the same time most girls would have done the same thing,' she answered,

calmly, letting a rather fervid glance shoot harmless by as she gave him another cup of tea.

'Ah! but you've done more than grow. May I, without hopelessly putting my foot in it, say how you've improved?'

'No, you may not,' said Sydney, 'for you haven't been here long enough to know whether I deserve the compliment. Please make something besides personal remarks, or else perhaps we shall quarrel.'

'Which Fate forbid!' returned the gentleman; 'the last thing on earth I want is either to begin with a quarrel, or,' very pointedly, 'to end with one.'

But that shaft, too, glanced unnoted by its aim, and Mr. Villiers was driven to make himself agreeable for the next hour on entirely new lines, with a companion not to be 'fetched' by any art of flirtation,

a baby at coquetry, though out of her teens, the like of whom in all his London life he had never encountered before.

Determined on approval, however, he found no fault with this specimen of a new class. On the contrary, he liked the change from every-day womankind, and flattered himself that, keeping well in sight a certain girlish dignity which Sydney, at her frankest, always wore, he made capital 'running' in the time that elapsed between their meeting and Mrs. Alwyn's return.

From Oakleigh Place the ladies came back in a state of honied sweetness. The Countess had been charming. Leonora had sung to her. Mr. Edward Duvesne had turned the pages. Some one had compared her voice to Patti's. Now here at home Rupert and Sydney were getting on admirably. Every plan seemed prosperous.

For a whole evening Mrs. Alwyn was superbly serene, and only once, when she was showing her nephew the little conservatory where he might be permitted a cigar, was the express object of his visit touched upon.

'Leonora is handsomer than even Aunt Helen,' said Mr. Villiers, 'and "little Sydney," as we used to call her——'

'Yes, Rupert. About her—what do you think—altogether?'

'That she's quite delightful. Developed every way—beautified amazingly!'

This was warmer praise than Leonora's —more than Mrs. Alwyn could stand.

'I am relieved that you like her—at first,' she said, her mouth drooping ominously at the corners; 'you will find out her best and worst characteristics by degrees. You may have to be careful, Sydney is so decided—what some would call wilful.'

'So much the better,' laughed Mr. Villiers, 'if she takes wilfully in my favour. I must try and make her.'

Then they said good-night, and no more conversation on the subject was exchanged for long.

But given a mother and suitor playing judiciously into each other's hands, the game went on with every prospect of success. Though Leonora and her mother performed their devotions at Oakleigh Church next day, Mr. Villiers elected to walk with Sydney to St. Clairs', gravely informing his companion that he thought people should always attend their parish church, though he would have been sorely puzzled to tell where or what his was! And, coached by the cunning Major, he fearlessly attacked his aunt's prejudices on feminine occupations, pronounced gardening a most invigorating exercise, and only

wished he could shake off office drudgery any day and come and help his 'cousins' at the work.

'But I shall be down again soon,' he informed Sydney on the Monday morning when his first visit ended, and she, at the request of her mother, whose head did so ache if she rose too early, attended their guest's seven o'clock breakfast. 'I feel no end better for this splendid air. I shall soon repeat the dose if I don't outstep my welcome.'

'There is no risk of that,' returned Sydney, pleased at this tribute to St. Clairs' curative powers, 'as mamma said last night, you must come soon and come often if it does you good.' And of this invitation the young man took full advantage.

'Glad, I have no doubt,' said Sydney to Mary Dacie, 'to get respite from that grinding office. He seems to be not very

strong, and I suppose they have to work very hard.'

'According to his own account,' said Miss Dacie, which was quite a vindictive speech for her; but she had taken an aversion to this rather *blasé*-looking young man, with his mixture of Bond Street and Madame Tussaud's *personnel*, and feared what people in the village began to gossip might be true; this frequent Sunday guest at The Dale might be after taking Sydney away.

But the suggestive confidences some women delight in were not to Mary Dacie's or to Sydney's taste. So the one kept her fears to herself, and the other never suspected their existence. Mr. Villiers came some half-dozen times the autumn through, and always left, if not more in love, yet more thoroughly convinced that this was the wife ordained for

him, though he still hesitated over bringing matters to a crisis. He was hard pressed for an announced engagement, for Tufter's bill and sundry other accounts grew clamorous for settlement. Yet every day at The Dale showed him Sydney was not a mere malleable piece of girlhood to be had for the asking. If she said 'No' to him she would abide by that 'No.' So it behoved him to feel the ground safe under his feet. Those thousands of hers were worth some pains, to say nothing of herself. Therefore he pursued his wooing with a cautious deliberation that would have provoked Mrs. Alwyn, had not side circumstances condoned delay.

The Comynghams had left Oakleigh in September. A scare as to the water supply at the House dispersed them till the spring.

'It's awfully provoking, especially for

me,' said the Honourable Edward, quite sentimentally, taking leave at The Dale, 'for I wanted to hurry on those builders at my new Rectory. The place ought to be done by the spring. I hope Miss Villiers will show an interest in it then, and tell me how it ought to be arranged.'

That speech was food for hope through long winter weeks, when Oakleigh church was supplied by a *locum tenens*, and saw little of Mrs. Alwyn or her daughter, It might be well, too, the elder lady consoled herself with thinking, that this break had occurred. Sydney's affair could now be adjusted at reasonable leisure. Her marriage-day might be decided on by the time the Comynghams came back; and they would be without her through the next summer's campaign, destined, the mother fondly hoped, to bring the bridegroom of her desire to Leonora's feet.

Thus through his flying visits Mr. Rupert's courtship was well seconded by his aunt Helen and—without much difficulty—the hours of his presence were made brighter to Sydney than those of his absence.

With some tact he watched her likings and turned them to his own use. A question of winter gifts was raised before him. Sydney, disappointed, had to give up most she desired to make. When Mr. Villiers next presented himself he was bewrapped in blanket-like rugs, purchased, he declared, at Hedyngham, to protect him from the east wind driving to St. Clairs, but no more use to him, so would Sydney dispose of them as she chose? Did he hear books mentioned, wished for, by some fortuitous chance he was sure to have such 'at home' (meaning at a particular bookshop off Oxford Street), or

could borrow them for her easily; and as weeks slipped by this prudent siege seemed likely to take effect.

A charming work on plant-lore had of late appeared. Knowing it to be of the very kind Sydney would delight in, Mr. Rupert brought it down, a Christmas gift, with—not to be too marked—bangles for Leonora, pheasants for his aunt.

Sydney, overjoyed at her prize, buried herself in its fascinating pages, and at the evening's end thanked the giver most expressively.

'You must read it yourself, Mr. Villiers, to know what I have been enjoying,' she said.

'I! Why, I know as much of the subject as of the Homeric bards! Plainly, nothing!'

'Oh! but it makes you like it if you will but begin.'

'Then will you teach me?'

Gravely—'Yes, if you wish.'

'*Then* I am sure to like it.'

'Precisely what I say.'

'With a difference,' said Mr. Rupert in lowered voice, 'which some time I must explain to you.'

'But not now,' replied Sydney, most unsuspicious still, 'for I have read myself to sleep. Good-night. And I don't know when I've enjoyed a Christmas evening so much. I have to thank you for it.' And she bestowed on Mr. Rupert a full beam of gratitude as he held the door open for her.

Leonora had gone to bed an hour before. Watching another girl's love-affair was very stupid work. Mrs. Alwyn alone was left to mark the words and smile.

'Well?' she said, questioning her nephew with a glance as he came back to the hearth-rug.

'Well, Aunt Helen,' he said, 'I feel very much your debtor. It won't be my fault if Sydney is not my wife long before next Christmas time.'

## CHAPTER XI.

### A GRAND DISCOVERY.

Having come to which stage, Mr. Villiers would probably have pressed his suit rapidly to conclusion, but for sundry interruptions unforeseen and unavoidable.

First came a month of snows and storms, that made country roads all but impassable even for journeys of profit, and utterly tabooed the notion of traversing them on journeys of pleasure. At least so Mrs. Alwyn wrote to her nephew, opining perhaps that an obstacle at this precise juncture might make him more ardent on his next visits. Then a political embroil-

ment with a cantankerous foreign Power brought clouds of war on the nation's horizon, agitated the War Department, and gave Mr. Rupert a *bonâ fide* dose of long hours. And with March came graver delay.

One of what Mrs. Alwyn called Sydney's 'pretty warbling choir,' a worthy little twelve-year-old Suffolk dumpling of the female sex named Patty Peggs, was 'took ailin,' and after vapouring through a prelude, suspected of chicken-pox, ague, or measles, developed by the end of a week a fine case of malignant typhoid. Miss Patty being the eldest of eight (the family including two sets of twins, which, as the poor mother said, 'du tell up so!') it may be inferred without much imagination that her share of daily bread was not super-abundant, to say nothing of the food illness needed.

Fearless of disease, Sydney at first went to the child with such supplies as Dr. Dacie recommended and her own narrow purse could furnish; but when the malady was duly declared, Mrs. Alwyn promptly forbade these ministrations. Leonora, alarmed at all fever, was infinitely terrified by a second and third case, resolutely refused to go out of doors or taste a breath of the air which blew between the infected village and "their nobility," and so nearly alarmed herself into illness of some sort, that her mother decided on flight as the lesser of two evils, sent the servants away on very close board wages, shut up The Dale, and carried her daughters off to the fresh breezes of a southern watering-place.

Sydney pleaded dolefully to be left at home, or with the Dacies. She might help them or Mr. Vaughan if illness spread. But her mother quickly negatived the

petition. 'People would say I had more regard for Leonora's health than yours,' she said, 'and nothing should induce me to leave you here.'

So, as an example of well-balanced affection, Sydney was carried off, and had to leave what the cottage neighbours called her 'poor little singin' mawther' to struggle through her phases of suffering without further help from her than could be trusted in the shape of shillings to Mary Dacie.

This effort of maternal justice, however, earned Mrs. Alwyn's amiability a long rest.

She was sorely provoked to find at their Bournemouth boarding-house that Sydney's by now distinguished face and style drew more attention than her sister's well-preserved charms; and by an attitude of petulance, not positively unkind but in-

expressibly wearing, she made it manifest to her younger child that as time went on she became more and more the 'one too many' of their trio.

'If Leonora and I could have been alone,' she complained, 'which of course we could not be, as you were so much too thoughtless to be left at St. Clairs—but if we *had* been alone we might have spent the spring in Paris. But travelling with a third practically doubles one's expenses. That has often kept me from a change when I should have enjoyed it.' And every item of each week's outlay was scanned through the same medium, driving Sydney into unavailing discomfort and wistful quiet.

The little coterie of semi-invalids among whom they were planted, watching the new-comers with amusement, were puzzled over the connection of the three, till the

widow of a City of London Knight, chief in the band of permanent boarders, took the bull by the horns, or otherwise accosted Mrs. Alwyn in the drawing-room one evening, and investigated the relationship.

'What a particularly charming brunette your younger—companion is!' she began ingratiatingly, 'at least, we presume her to be the younger—the one reading by the table.'

Mrs. Alwyn looked deliberately through her glasses as if to make sure of the person alluded to. 'Oh! I see—Sydney—yes, she is often admired.'

'You said "Miss Sydney," I think, did you not?' pursued the inquirer, not to be daunted by Mrs. Alwyn's return to her newspaper; 'of course, Sydney is her surname?'

'I beg your pardon. I said 'Sydney' merely. She is Miss Alwyn.'

'The same name as your own then!'

'Certainly.'

'Related, then, to your husband?'

'Yes, and—to myself.'

'Deceased wife's sister business,' thought the astute questioner triumphantly, 'that accounts for this woman's oddness!'—'Your niece, I presume?' she persisted, aloud.

'My daughter, madam!' answered Mrs. Alwyn, so sharply that her inquisitive ladyship, who possessed a sense of the ludicrous, couldn't refrain from laughter.

'Why, bless the woman!' she cried, Mrs. Alwyn looking daggers at the homely expletive, 'why didn't you just tell me so at first? I set myself to find out, because I vowed I *did* hear her say "mamma," though the rest protested that only the other one belonged to you.'

And so often and so keenly did Sydney

feel as if it were 'only the other one' who belonged to her mother, that those sea-side weeks dragged slowly along, and she hailed with delight the first chance of returning to the faces and occupations of St. Clairs.

A clean bill of health was reported in April, and Mrs. Alwyn, desiring to spend a week at her brother's in Hampshire with Leonora (three would be inconvienent again) Sydney was permitted to return and stay with the Dacies before they all re-united at The Dale.

Nowhere had the girl been more missed than at the Gate House, where she shone always at her brightest, paying them in every coin she could conceive for their kindness to her earlier girlhood. Now Mary received her joyfully with,

'How well you are looking, and how glad I am to have got you back!'

And the traveller, with a hug and a kiss, answered,

'Also, how glad I am to be back, but how well you are *not* looking! What's the matter, Mary? Has anything gone amiss while I was away?'

'No,' Mary declared, 'nothing so very particular,' but bit by bit, in the privacy of upstairs unpacking, it came out how her father was less equal to work than ever that spring; his lameness gained on him so, and 'mother,' who had never flagged, but kept such a willing shoulder to the wheel so many years, was not like herself. The strain of all her middle-age was telling on her now. And the 'boys,' long since men, two married, one in Canada, were getting less able, between growing families and uncertain business, to give their small aids to the old home, and so, confessed poor Mary Dacie—permitting

herself the extraordinary luxury of five minutes' collapse—'It seems as if we are all on the down-hill road together, Sydney dear; and sometimes I'm such a goose I get miserable over it.'

To which Sydney, who had long dreaded this state of things, could only return the comfort of caresses. The outlook was gloomy, she knew, so uninviting that she must have been glad to quit its contemplation, for, after some minutes diligent unpacking, she changed the subject by asking, most irrelevantly, if Mr. Drayton had been to St. Clairs while she was away.

It was not often Sydney showed such lack of sympathy. Mary Dacie sighed as she answered 'No,' and she sighed again as she smoothed her ruffled brown hair, and stroked out of sight a few obtrusive silver threads. What a foil she looked to

that girl in the sweet bloom of her twenty years! But she mustn't grow curmudgeonly. Admirers! Lovers! these must be pleasant pastures for young minds to stray along. She wouldn't grudge them to Sydney, even—with a sensation as of a rising sob firmly subdued—even in the shape of—Mr. Drayton, or Mr. Rupert Villiers.

This latter gentleman, though debarred from prosecuting his plans in person through the spring, had not allowed himself to be forgotten. Early in the year each note to his Aunt Helen had contained some special message for Sydney, unfailingly delivered. About that date in February when feathered monogamists select their spouses for the coming spring, a florist of Petersham (a stroke to please the Major, that!) packed off a splendid mass of sweet-scented lilies of the valley,

and the address, 'Miss Alwyn, The Dale, St. Clairs,' was in Mr. Rupert's handwriting. Reviews to her liking, magazines many, found their way similarly to the young lady at Bournemouth, in company with society papers for her mother and sister. And now, definite desire and intention of success strengthened by the propitious Christmas visit, Mr. Villiers felt no hesitation in assuring his anxious father that, spite of postponement, everything was going on as right as a trivet, and the paternal purse would probably be drawn upon for wedding garments shortly after midsummer.

Meanwhile, as the season was gay, and likely to be his last free entirely from petticoat control, the young man took licence to treat his good resolutions for the future pretty freely.

The singer who had once enthralled him

was far away now, enchanting dollars by thousands from the rich citizens of another continent, but her pedestal was not long vacant. Small pink tickets for the Opera Comique, and large, long bills for suppers connected with the same; companion documents to Mr. Tufter's original one, and a run of late hours over a green table much best left alone; these, to say nothing of more legitimate indulgences, swelled a debit account of considerable proportions as weeks went by, and relied for settlement mainly on Sydney's fortune. Since, 'Hang it, you know,' thought Mr. Rupert, 'five thousand, or four perhaps, will be plenty to tie up. She'll like to do something towards starting the domestic mill, that'll be only fair. The rest we'll leave loose as a sort of general fund.'

And over the manipulation of that general fund Mr. Rupert's fingers itched

prospectively, after a fashion that boded ill for its long existence, while for his first visit to The Dale in May he began to look impatiently as for a serious crisis in his fate. But this crisis was yet to be put off by doings we must halt to explain.

Among the elements of uneasiness underlying Sydney Alwyn's young life was one extremely common to mankind—the want of money. Endowed with a quick eye to other people's needs, a ready hand to help them, it was no light bond to feel herself always scantily provided with means to this end, and in nothing was the contrast of her nature to her mother's and sister's more clearly shown than in this matter of £ s. d.

Mrs. Alwyn would nail down the charges of a laundress to the lowest farthing, and travel miles, metaphorically, to save a mite; Leonora invariably had headaches

on offertory Sundays at St. Clairs', and, as Phillips would grimly say, was never known to give away so much as her cast-off frilling, and neither lady grudged any domestic screwing which would supply means of external display; while Sydney's economies, contrariwise, began and ended with herself. All she could garner up went in channels she was not in the habit of talking about, and many a rueful hour it cost her to think that these savings were so provokingly small.

Mrs. Alwyn, however, took good care that only a very small portion of her income should be wasted through Sydney's proclivities, and so it came to pass that the girl had to tax her native ingenuity to make the most of the little she possessed.

She was making, one May morning, an after-breakfast inspection of last winter's garments, pondering over what could be

spared to robe the convalescent Patty Peggs, and two or three junior sisters, lamenting secretly that she must not venture on slicing up a suggestively-useful serge, for fear her mother might not see fit to replace it before cold weather came again, when Phillips entered, and explaining, 'The bag was late this morning, miss. Mistress sent this up here,' laid a letter on the table.

Sydney's postal communications were few. A glance at the old-fashioned business envelope told her from whom this came—Jacob Cheene. Glad to receive it alone, since Mrs. Alwyn never saw the clerkly superscription without annoyed comment, she opened this missive of her father's old friend, and prepared to read it undisturbed.

But the first sight of its news almost took away her breath.

She always wrote to him simply and

freely, more freely perhaps than she could ever speak to anyone at St. Clairs, and in her last she had dwelt rather dolefully on the poor famished home of her choir invalid, wishing she could have given the little pale-cheeked mortal a taste of sea-breezes; though, as she had ended, wishes were, alas! vain—the surplus of her allowance would go such a little way.

Now, in Jacob's letter, came this remarkable response:—

'It is like your own father's child, Miss Sydney, to be looking after the poor about you. He was as free as the day as long as ever he was able, and I will make bold to say you will copy him when you take your own money. Your birth-day comes next month, I know. I remember when you were born as well as yesterday. I wish I were not too old a man to travel

over the country and bring you some trifles you, and you only, would value. But they shall get to you somehow, though I may never live to shake hands again with my dear master's daughter. And please to remember that on June the 8th nobody prays more fervently for prosperity to your six thousand pounds, and for a long life for you to do good with it, than

'Your very true and dutiful friend,

'JACOB CHEENE.'

Six thousand pounds! *Her* six thousand pounds!

Whatever did the old clerk mean?

Sydney flushed up and all her pulses started off full gallop at the thought of such wealth in her own hands. Patty Peggs was clothed in blue serge instanter. The damp, ill-drained domicile which the entire

family of Peggs inhabited was deserted: they were transferred by magic, high and dry, to a six-roomed house. The rector had his blanket-club endowed, so he hadn't to go begging every winter. The Dacies —oh!—with a great joyful inspiration—if it were true! But not a moment could she wait without hearing if this extraordinary fortune were really so near at hand. Letter held tight, away she went through her mother's boudoir, where she heard voices.

The inner door was slightly ajar. Mrs. Alwyn, reading aloud to Leonora something the post had brought, heard nothing of the light approaching step. Sydney could not avoid catching the last sentence.

'We mean no offence, but seein' one of us is wholly laid by now, and you know full well, ma'am, how we've bore up again

our troubles from beginnin' to end, we humbly ask a trifle now and—— Sydney!' —Mrs. Alwyn broke off, her face, in common parlance, as black as a thunder-cloud 'Why did you not knock? Never—never should you enter a room in that manner when people are reading letters!'

'I beg your pardon, mamma. I didn't mean to interrupt you. Is yours a troublesome one?'

'Ye—es—no—oh, no! That is, nothing particular. Merely a begging letter. Is yours more important?'

The girl's bearing was so wonderfully bright, for a moment Mrs. Alwyn thought Mr. Villiers had proposed in writing and was certainly to be accepted.

'It seems so to me, mamma. But if you, for once, will read what Mr. Cheene says, you can best tell me if it really is.'

And she laid the open epistle down for perusal.

A suspicion of its contents came over Mrs. Alwyn, but she read it slowly through without a word, her face lowering at every line. Then she folded and almost flung it back to the owner.

'Your true and dutiful friend is a most meddlesome old man!' she said briefly.

'Then it *is* true!' cried Sydney; her delight in the news not to be quenched even by this reception of it: 'Where, oh where does the money come from, mamma!'

'From me. That is, if you will kindly have patience and listen—' for Sydney uttered a bewildered ejaculation, 'from the sum secured to me by marriage settlement. You would have heard all in due time if this ridiculous interference had not fore-

stalled the proper explanation. Mercifully, your father put away a few thousands for any family he might have; until any child or children came of age, the interest was mine exclusively. I explained part of this to you once before. Now when your birthday arrives next month you are at liberty to assume the control of the money, six thousand pounds. I presume you will expect to lay the interest out yourself instead of leaving me to do so.'

Sydney looked almost aghast at the prospect, after her very meagre allowance. She felt such a person of property!

'Why, however much will it be, mamma?' she all but gasped.

'Between two and three hundred a year; *but*,' as Sydney barely restrained a delighted note, 'you must of course pay properly for your share of this home: while you stay in it.'

'But that will leave me rich!' cried Sydney, 'if you take half, or even more. Oh, mamma,' venturing to let a hand drop on Mrs. Alwyn's shoulder, 'I can't help being very glad. I hope it doesn't vex you.'

'Vex me! Oh dear no,' so drawing up her handsome figure as to rid herself of contact with that warm, eager young hand: 'But naturally I don't exult as you do. In a certain way, remember, your gain is my loss. Now—' with just the glimmer of a sneer, 'of course you want to carry your news to those Dacies. Be sure and say it was merely antedated by that garrulous old man. And—Sydney,' as the girl turned away, chilled, subdued, somehow she and her mother could never either rejoice or mourn together, 'as you pass the post-office, bring me half-a-crown's worth of stamps.'

Thus did Mrs. Alwyn merge these wondrous tidings in the current of the commonplace, effectually damping her daughter's pleasure for the hour. But it renewed itself before long, and during the May days that followed many and many a superb castle did Miss Sydney rear on the solid foundation of those six thousands.

It was while the full glamour of this brilliant promise was upon her that Mr. Villiers came down again, and felt himself fairly checked by the frank innocence with which his surprise and congratulations were claimed. 'I have such a piece of news to tell you,' said Sydney, the first minute she was with him alone. 'Something I really think you will like to hear. In quite a very small way I am actually a little bit of an heiress, Mr. Villiers. Value six thousand pounds!'

Love would have made no stumbling-block of that speech but it put interest into a quandary. Guiltily conscious of having been very much indeed aware of the grand fact all the way through, Mr. Rupert expressed his satisfaction awkwardly and in guarded phrase, (at which Sydney was sorry, having counted on his sharing her gratification more warmly; she did so want someone to be very glad at it,) and the great question he had been determining to ask her somehow stuck in his throat.

Holding conference with his aunt that evening, 'Upon my honour,' he said, with a sheepishness that was about the most creditable trait yet recorded of him, 'when a girl has just told you she is worth so much a fellow can't decently make a dash at it all in a moment. It would have been better now if I'd spoken at Christmas. As I didn't I'll stake my luck on my next

coming. I can get my holiday just about the birthday week, Aunt Helen, and bring everything to the right end then.'

And as a man cannot be forced into proposing against his will, Mrs. Alwyn could only acquiesce.

She bestowed anything though but benedictions on Mr. Cheene for his share in this further procrastination!

## CHAPTER XII.

### GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

Verily, during the next two or three weeks anyone would have found a difficulty in impressing upon Sydney Alwyn that money is the root of all evil.

On the contrary, it seemed the root whence flowers of delight and comfortable fruits innumerable must surely spring forth. At any rate her share of this earthly pelf was destined to a joyful career, and as if determined to lose no time in starting her income on a happy mission, Sydney actually went boldly to her mother

the day after Rupert Villiers left, and begged the loan of twenty pounds, to be repaid out of the very first of those mighty quarterly receipts she was anticipating.

This singular request arose out of an hour at the Gate-House that noon.

There, Mrs. Dacie instead of being as usual actually at work or waiting on her good doctor husband, was reported invisible: actually and confessedly not well enough to be downstairs, and the sunny sitting room looked sadly empty, the master grievously hipped and lonely without her cheery presence.

'She was not really ill. Oh, dear no!' Mary said with anxious effort to believe her own words, 'only tired: with the heat, perhaps!' And Doctor Dacie watched his thermometer, grumbling over the glorious weather, very ready and desirous to

persuade himself that ten degrees less warmth would quite restore his good wife, deluding himself by any fiction, rather than confess that the labours of making both ends meet through many years was revenging itself now on mind and body.

But Sydney could well read between these poorly deceptive lines, and began casting about how her new power could amend the situation.

'If the mother had taken a holiday in the spring,' fidgetted the doctor, dense as men so often are to the possibilities of the family purse, 'she might have been set up for the summer,' and lo, here was the rich young woman's opportunity.

'Why shouldn't she go now, Dr. Dacie?'

'I want her to, my dear. Her sisters in Warwickshire would have her any day, but——'

'But mamma couldn't go so far,' broke in Mary hastily, the colour mounting over the lines on her fair kind face, 'I don't mean'— as her father began 'pshaw!'— 'I don't mean that she is too ill—but—'

And Sydney comprehended those 'buts' as well as possible. The doctor had not got all last Christmas's payments in yet, few though they were. An active young man from Edinburgh had settled at Oakleigh, and was diminishing the scanty list of patients every quarter. There was no hoard laid by for holidays. No fund to furnish change for the house mistress. 'Why,' thought Sydney, hiding the sparkle of her swift design behind the outspread *Standard*, 'it seems as if I were made rich on purpose for this!' And not an hour had she lost in securing from Mrs. Alwyn that advance which was to speed Mrs. Dacie on her health-seeking journey.

That Mrs. Alwyn demurred at the loan, goes without saying. But Sydney, in the strength of her new position, was irrepressible. Between entreaty and persuasion, backed by usurious offer, she carried her point.

'If you lend me the money, mamma,' she promised, when refusal seemed imminent, 'I'll give you that mirror from the Hedyngham china-shop, with yellow roses round it, for interest. Now!' and then, pretending to joke at the bribe she had every intention of accepting, Mrs. Alwyn yielded. Off went Sydney, triumphant, to Mary Dacie, and the upshot of a very April interview was preparation for Mrs. Dacie to have a whole fortnight's rest with her sisters at Chaddeley, and the arch conspirator's only regret was that nothing could induce her friends to use more than half the sum she brought them.

'If we want more we will ask for it,' Mary promised; so the solitary note went into hiding against possible requirements, and Sydney, in most infectiously high spirits, haunted the Gate-House till its mistress, with Mary to drive her to the nearest station, was fairly started for what St. Clairs folk called 'the sheers!'

'Good luck for all of us go with you, Moll,' cried the doctor as Punch trotted off.

'And better still come back!' cried Sydney (how often she remembered that valediction later on!). And then she hovered, as blithe as a bee, about the doctor, beguiling him into tales of when he and his Moll were young, and what a pretty woman she was, till by-and-by Mary came smiling back, reporting her mother gone off looking better already, and an eloquent clasp of Sydney's fingers sent the girl

away so brimful of contentment she could almost have cried for gratitude over her golden thousands.

An evil! Nay, that was downright slander. Money was delicious. Delicious! If this poor fraction had sent such circles of relief rippling over one whole household, what might the rest do? It coloured with a rosy hue even the dull neutral tints of her home. If her mother should smile over a china-framed mirror she would often have cause to smile!

A great joyful perspective that 'open Sesame' of wondrous coin disclosed, and the vanishing point was—Love! Surely she could now do so much for so many, and that should be her payment. Such a *Jubilate* stirred within her as she passed the church as made the glitter of its windows seem an invitation opportune and not to be refused. A sacrilegious little

male Peggs, playing surreptitious leap-frog among the tomb-stones, was captured and set to work at the back of the organ for the sum of twopence, and seated before the keys Sydney herself, tears in her eyes and her heart in her voice, sang forth her gladness in a quaint psalm of Bach's setting, found (incongruous enough there) among her Father's few possessions.

Again and again the happy harmony rang out. 'Rejoice and be thankful! Rejoice and be thankful!' And perhaps in all the centuries that the wide-winged oak-carved angels had looked gravely down from the timber roof no truer votive notes had risen from below than these of Sydney Alwyn's unselfish exultation.

'Are you as happy as you sound?' said someone close by as she ceased singing, and she discovered the rector, unseen, had been her audience.

'Well, I do believe I am,' she answered, blinking the tell-tale moisture from her long lashes as she closed the organ and released the curly-headed Peggs. 'You don't think me utterly childish for it, do you?'

'Nay,' he answered very kindly, knowing, though not from her, something of the Gate-House doings. 'You have every right to revel in the present and what it is bringing you. Only take an old man's counsel. Don't set your heart on it too much. Riches sometimes make themselves wings and fly away.'

'Ah, but,' she answered, 'mine shall not. I mean to be a penurious old lynx and never exceed my income.'

'Good!' laughed Mr. Vaughan, 'long may this wisdom last. But—' lapsing into seriousness, 'if ever this money of yours eludes your vigilance, if it melts away, let

the record of its use leave a pleasant memory behind. For,' half soliloquising, bachelor fashion, 'to have done your best, with all you had, so long as you were able; there's always comfort in that. Though,' as Sydney's features reflected his grave mood, 'I ought not to dose my pupil with truisms to-day. I had been writing to that friend Drayton and I spoke of and fell quoting my attempts at consolation. Now for something cheerfuller. Will and Ben,' (the boys had got their scholarships and were away at school,) 'are doing famously. The impudent lads sent word they'll coach you when they come home in July!'

'So they shall,' said Sydney gladly, though the dim by-flitting of that other sorrow-tried life had made her heart ache for a minute, 'and they shall both have Genevas with backs that won't bend and

crystals that won't break, for their pains. Tell them so, please.'

'I shall do nothing of the sort, penurious Miss Alwyn,' returned the rector, 'for fear you should change your mind.'

'I change my mind!' reproachfully. 'But, Mr. Vaughan,' stopping short in the church porch, 'is—is Mr. Drayton ever coming to see you again?'

'He promised he would, but writes that this property of his is in confusion. He may turn out worth much less or much more than he expected. I suppose he is busy over that.'

'I wish he would come,' said Sydney, and the rector looked puzzled.

'What, even now?' he asked.

'More now than ever,' said Sydney; and then went off, leaving her old friend wondering what this wish for Richard Drayton betokened, and whether it sounded

auspicious for that dark moustached young man so often at The Dale, at whom his 'even now' had pointed, a hint, perhaps, too indefinite to evoke response.

But taking license from the inuendoes sowed by Mrs. Alwyn as part of her tactics, other tongues were more outspoken, and speeches at first bewildering, clearer later on, greeted Sydney even as she went home that day.

'I'm wholly fearful we'll be a-losin' of ye now, Miss,' said old Mrs. Hills, her father's last attendant, to whom, in passing, she mostly stayed and spoke. ''Taint likely you'll be long here now.'

'Why not?' asked Sydney, unsuspiciously. Some absurd version of her coming fortune must have reached the old dame she supposed. 'Why should I go away? I don't want to.'

'Ay, ay,' chuckled the old body, 'that's

on'y like the lady should say, but there's them that won't fall in with it. "A thief," askin' pardon for the sayin', "don't leave his sack behind," now do he?' And then Mrs. Hills, who was afflicted with asthma, fell into such a fit of mirthful choking that in simple charity her visitor nodded good-bye and departed. Only, however, to encounter equally mysterious words before she had gone fifty yards further. For round the corner of the village street swept Lady Comyngham's low phaeton, herself, with the cockaded groom behind, driving the handsome cream cobs, which, much against their will, were reined in at sight of Miss Alwyn.

'I have been at The Dale,' said the Countess, leaning forward most amiably, 'and was so sorry to miss seeing you. But allow me to congratulate you now. I hope this event will bring you much happiness.'

It was curious, thought Sydney, for her mother, who all too evidently grudged this division of income, to speak of it to strangers, but so she must have done! And, taking this as omen of pleasanter feeling between them, the girl thanked Lady Comyngham with warmth, and hoped she might use the change so that no one would have to repent it.

'Very, very becomingly said,' approved the Countess, giving Sydney's shoulders a coax with her whip. 'I trust you'll prosper, I'm sure, though these matters are dreadful lotteries, as I've told my girls.'

'When the Earl came into his fortune, I suppose,' thought Sydney, answering with such an air of unshakeable security, 'I hope there's not much of the lottery in my case!' that the Countess, for all her fifty years ups and downs, would not dishearten her with any more wisdom of experience.

'Oh, well, well,' she said ('Stand still, Spitfire!'), 'I presume this has been looked forward to so long by all parties that you feel safe of each other and sure of everything going right. Make my felicitations to—oh,' as the cobs took violent umbrage at an approaching wheelbarrow, 'these creatures won't let a woman speak! Goodbye, Miss Alwyn,' as the pair curvetted off. 'Come to Oakleigh some Saturday. Both of you.'

'Leonora too,' mused Sydney. And fell wondering whether success would attend that lofty scheme of her mother's, which by now she understood, though no confidence on the subject was extended to her.

On that point Mrs. Alwyn's hopes were now in the zenith of hopefulness, for Mr. Duvesne had been among the first callers after their return. Ostensibly he came to thank her for certain weekly doles supplied

from The Dale to an old couple in his parish—Mrs. Alwyn's smallest light never wasted a ray for want of being set on a candlestick—but the delighted mother marked how he reported progress of his Rectory, lamented to Leonora that it was not half what he wished 'for a lady.' Would she look it through some day, with Mrs. Alwyn and her sister? Would she tell him how it could be improved? 'Of course,' gazing about the handsome Dale drawing-room, 'it was nothing like this. The old building and Miss Villiers' perfect taste——' Mrs. Alwyn credited Leonora with every suitable shape and shade on the premises—'had made this unmatchable. Honestly, The Dale ought to be part of the Oakleigh estate, but he supposed the absent owner would say "no" to that.'

Hereupon his hostess had returned that she *in propriâ personâ* was proprietor of The

Dale now; she had completed the purchase of her brother. And she hoped never to part from it except to her elder daughter. So, unluckily, the place must be burdened with her Leonora!

'And a great improvement the burden will be,' said Mr. Duvesne gallantly. 'Pray don't imagine I had any intention of robbing these parts when I made my selfish suggestion just now.'

With which the young clericus had glided from the topic Mrs. Alwyn fondly hoped he was approaching, into information of a recent domestic event, interesting, of course, to intimates only. His sister, Lady Avena Massey, was the happy mother of a little son, successor to four sisters, the first grandson of the family, a young man who had caused as much stir at Oakleigh Place as in his native Staffordshire home.

'My mother,' said the Honourable Edward, laughing, 'has been fussing over silver mugs, and the girls have been stitching at some white garment long enough for a grown-up ghost, and the people at Barnes had been sending up gifts most glaringly useless to a fortnight old baby—'

'And why,' exclaimed Mrs. Alwyn to Leonora, as soon as their informer was gone, 'why should not I send something that *will* be useful! At such a time it must be accepted as a compliment. A son is all very well. Even a small squire like Mr. Massey wishes for one, I suppose. But they will have to save money for him to spend by and by, and they'll value money's worth now all the more.'

The consequence of which happy inspiration was the packing off to Barnes of the deep-pointed breadth of costly *guipure* that long ago had raised many a grand dame's

envy when displayed upon some velvet-fronted dinner dress, and with it went a cleverly worded note, making the offering to the 'new, most precious boy,' in terms that quite affected the unconscious little animal's mother, drawing from her a tremulously penciled acknowledgment of this gorgeous christening robe, which the giver modestly styled 'a trifle, better put to this delightful use than allowed to lie by till moth made food of it.'

The immediate result of this little manœuvre was precisely what Mrs. Alwyn had calculated on. The Countess had called and been most affable. Then had Mrs. Alwyn let fall those somewhat premature words concerning her younger child, which she intended to turn to more accounts than one. Ten days afterwards a luncheon had followed at Oakleigh Place. Quite a family affair. No other strangers

than Leonora and her mother, Sydney (for once to Mrs Alwyn's complete approval) being tied to an engagement in the parish; and Lady Comyngham had commented on Leonora's pink and white colouring, 'Apple blossom,' she called it, adding, 'it was the very complexion gentlemen admired. Her son Edward had spoken of it. He fancied he had particular reason to think it beautiful. Some day Mrs. Alwyn would see if he was right!'

In expectation of that day Mrs. Alwyn had to wait, hiding intense excitement under outward calm. But she drove her pair of plans along the daily course with the skill of a cool head and a firm hand. It was desirable—best—kindest—that Sydney should be detached from the The Dale. This she never lost sight of for a moment. And the sooner the better. Then, if this other business lagged she

could invoke the aid of little diplomatic shifts, shadows of shams that the younger daughter's honest-eyed presence made difficult, or impossible. Sydney safely away would be a restraint well gone. Therefore, though the girl in her new-born elation was difficult to depress, Mrs. Alwyn took some pains to make her feel that she considered the partition of property a fresh partition of interests, pleasures, affections, and let her distinctly foresee that the Sydney of the future would be more isolated in her home than the Sydney of the past.

So counter ran all this to the semi-heiress's deepest desires—she who had so yearned for love that even she wanted to buy it!—that there is small wonder if it drove her straight on to the result intended, and if when Mr. Rupert Villiers came down armed—for this was to be his grand

attack!—with the very rose she had been longing for, and the most attractive manner he could don, she received him as readily as thirsty leaves a shower!

And well the young man played the last round in his hand. Marriage, or some means of clearing up with his creditors, was imperative. That remembrance filled him with keenly nervous energy. By now those often repeated insinuations were unfolding their meaning to Sydney.

What did they mean to her? Was she glad, or sorry? As yet she could tell nothing. She was dazzled: bewildered. But the new mood touched her with such peculiar grace that Mr. Villiers's prearranged attentions came very easy to him; and made the moment that should end this Act the First seem very alluring.

Beyond his second day with them the moment surely would not have been

delayed, delightful as was the dallying on the verge of confident conquest; but once again accident played him an unkind trick.

A line from the Gate-House called Sydney there, and sent her back in distress.

Mr. Villiers was on the lawn, watching for her, she felt, as she returned, and to him she confided the trouble.

'Mrs. Dacie went out for a holiday that was to do her so much good, now she is ill and longing to get home. But her sisters write that it is impossible for her to travel alone, and ask if Mary can go for her. But of course she cannot, for Doctor Dacie is just helpless without her. Oh, Mr. Villiers, I am so fond of Mrs. Dacie and so sorry about it all. And I do so want to ask mamma to let me go for her, but—I dare not!'

And the beautiful eyes looking up under their black fringe said "Ask for me!" A petition that Mr. Villiers, seeing in it occasion out of which he could make capital, answered promptly:

'Let me be your envoy to my aunt and make it smooth with her. Where is she? I'll soon get her to say "yes."'

And this, by what seemed legerdemain to Sydney, he actually achieved, and noon saw her off on the hasty Samaritan journey.

Mr. Villiers drove her to Hedyngham, Hills *vis-à-vis* tabooing all but commonplace talk. But when Sydney was ensconced in the stuffy luxury of a first-class, her charioteer leaned on the window, reminding her:

'You will be sure to return for Friday?'

'Before then, most likely,' blushing at his anxious expression.

'For I've something most particular I want to give you then.'

'I shall be home.'

'And I shall want to ask you something, too!'

'Yes?' nervous, and deeply crimsoning again.

'Do you think I deserve anything for helping to send you away when I—wanted you at The Dale?'

'You deserve a great deal for getting me leave to go to poor Mrs. Dacie.'

'A great deal? Then you are grateful to me?' The train was moving off, but he paced by it, looking under the brim of her brown hat at her downcast eyes. 'Grateful? Yes, very.'

'Then, Sydney, when you come back I shall ask for my reward!'

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD, BLENHEIM HOUSE.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 084218202